

Marriage in Heaven

By the Same Author

THESE ROUTES GO DEEP
THREE CEDARS
THE WOMAN WHO WAS TOMORROW
THE GYPSY VANS COME THROUGH
LAUGHTER ON CHEYNE WALK
LEAVES BEFORE THE STORM
ROSE SWEETMAN
THE QUESTING TROUT
PASTORAL
THE CYPRESSES GROW DARK
SILVER ORCHIDS
SPRING IN SEPTEMBER
THE GOLDEN FLAME
TRAILING GLORY
GYPSY FLOWER
ETC., ETC.

Marriage in Heaven



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Desire may be dead
And still a man can be
A nesting-place for sun and rain,
Wonder outwaiting pain
As in a wintry tree.

D. H. LAWRENCE.

PART I

CHAPTER I

Never a bird within my sad heart sings
But Heaven a flaming stone of thunder flings.
O valiant wheel! O most courageous Heaven!
To leave me lonely with the broken wings.

OMAR KHAYYAM.

SOMETIMES Doreen found it very lonely in the convent. She supposed that it was really because she was older than most of the girls. At seventeen they left. They had homes to go to, they had people who wanted them, and who took them back into the bosom of their families.

Doreen had no home.

She could not remember the time when she had been brought here, but the nuns told her that it had been her mother who had come with her. Clothes were provided, fees were paid.

When the others went home for holidays, Doreen stayed on.

"This is your place," said the nuns.

"If it were really my place, then I should be a nun," she replied.

It was strange that she had never had any vocation. Usually the girls all went through a phase when they wanted to become nuns themselves. They got religion badly. It came and it went, all save little Bertha Strange who had been here when Doreen arrived, and who now went about in a novice's habit, and rang the bell for chapel, and who seemed wholly satisfied that it should be so.

Doreen was eighteen yesterday.

At eighteen most girls were out in the world. They became somebody; they either went back to a gay life, and lived a social round, or they took on a job. Girls married at eighteen, thought Doreen, and she was resentful.

It was so calm and peaceful in this convent set on the side of the hill, with the view of the *Jungfrau* through the cypresses in the garden. It was a calm that she wanted to destroy, for youth loves change; it cannot bear quiet. She wanted adventure. She was so young that she longed to spread her wings and get away. She wanted to be doing.

"The world," the Mother had said only yesterday, "is a hard place. You should consider yourself lucky to be so far from it."

Although she said yes, she did not think so in her heart. She needed the world, she wanted to see beyond the convent garden.

Here there was that innate peace, the peace of rosemary and lavender. Beyond the flowers in their tall herbaceous borders lay the little herb gardens, where the nuns who tended the dispensary worked. The scent of mint, and of sage, and of "old man" came to Doreen where she sat. But it was unsatisfying.

Just lately she had rebelled so much.

She wanted to know about the world from which she had come, why she had never gone home at holiday times like the other girls, why nobody ever visited her. She wanted to know what would happen when her time here was done, and why wasn't it done now? She was much older than

the usual leaving age, there must be some niche that she could fill.

This morning she had realised that something unusual was happening. This morning, which was the day after her eighteenth birthday. The Mother had ultimately called her into the little room where she sat at the desk which had no ornamentation, in the big chair with no carving.

"There are things that I must tell you, about yourself," said the Mother quietly.

"I have been wanting to know them so long," Doreen answered.

She had sat down on the little stool before the desk, where she had sat as a little girl time after time, and had listened to the Mother talking, and had watched that lovely emotionless face, in which there was something of true beauty, a goodness which is of the soul.

"I am ready to hear," she said.

The Mother went back to the day when the child had come to the convent, only just able to talk, and certainly not able to remember. They had had a letter about her. It seemed that she had been fostered out since birth, with an old nurse, who lived in a village in a mountain pass. The old nurse had been a worthy old woman, and good, then suddenly she had been taken ill. Other arrangements had to be made for the little girl in her charge.

Her mother had brought her here.

"I thought that I had no mother?" she challenged the Mother Superior. She had always believed that her parents were dead, that, and that alone could, she felt, explain the fact that she was

here in this convent, without home to visit in the holidays, and without anybody to come to see her.

"Your mother is dead . . . now," said the nun, quietly sitting back in the uncarved seat and surveying the girl.

She told the story.

Her mother had been an actress. She had been one of the successful ones. She had started dancing in a café in Paris; yes, she was a Parisienne; the Mother said quietly. She had worked her way up, and then, with the world at her feet, with love, and admiration, and everything that a girl could want, she had suddenly found tragedy staring her in her face.

She had had a baby.

She had never told anyone whose child it was, and the Mother had no idea. An admirer perhaps, a young soldier's, who was on his way to fight, somebody who had loved too well but not so wisely.

"It is not for us to judge," said the Mother.

There was something irksome about her quiet voice as she said it, for at that particular moment Doreen felt a wave of resentment against the mother who had cheated her into life, and then had left her here forsaken.

"Go on," she said, and her voice sounded husky with emotion.

The Mother told the rest of the story. The actress had had to conceal what was happening; she had gone away into the mountains. In the house of her old nurse the baby had been born, and the nurse had accepted it and had cared for it, and had, indeed, been very kind.

"You have much to be grateful to her for," said the Mother kindly.

When the nurse became so ill, the young mother had come back from her tour, and had been bewildered as to what to do. She had in her need been guided by an older man, some relation, the Mother thought. Together they had come to the convent that night, fifteen years ago, and had left the little girl with the Mother.

The older man was a trustee of the child, it was explained, and every quarter the fees would be paid through him. They left the address of a firm of solicitors in Bael. It had never been delayed.

When the little girl was ten, news came to the convent that her mother was dead. There had been an accident in a big Parisian theatre where she was playing. Some scenery had caught fire, and the safety curtain had stuck half-way. There had been a panic at the very moment when she was on the stage, in a frock made of tulle and roses. A flame had snatched at the frock, and nothing could save her. She had died very quietly, said the Mother, and crossed herself.

But Doreen was not feeling tenderness and sympathy for the woman who had borne her. She was feeling deeply emotional. She hated the thought that she had never been allowed to share in that life, she had never had holidays, she had never gone home, and she knew that she was the type that would value home so much!

She could not shed tears for an unknown mother.

"The fees," said the Mother quietly, "came

every quarter, and we kept you here. Now there will be a change."

But she would say no more.

Doreen had come out here into the garden to think, and she knew that the world was spinning round her, and that she did not know what was coming next. Only the urge to be away. Only the longing to get from all this, and to break into the world itself which lay beyond.

Youth chafes against its prison bars. It chafes hard.

She saw Bertha Strange coming into the herb garden, her white habit gleaming in the sun. She was short and dumpy and the white hood almost hid her little round face. Seeing Doreen sitting there, she turned from the herbs and came into the garden itself, with the sunflowers tattered against the blue daisies, and the poppies, and the borage all mingling together.

"Bertha," said Doreen, "I want to talk to you. Have you heard what is going to happen to me?"

Bertha had never been very intelligent. She was one of the stolid kind, who go steadily through life, and never look to right or to left. She stared frankly at Doreen as though surprised that she didn't know.

"The gentleman is here now," she said.

"Gentleman . . . ?"

"Your guardian."

That must be the trustee that the Mother had spoken of, the very much older man who had come with her the first time that she had arrived at the convent, in the arms of her flirtatious little mother.

"Am I going away?"

Bertha glanced at her suspiciously. It occurred to her that perhaps she ought not to be talking.

"Has not the Mother told you?"

"Yes," lied Doreen quickly, because this was something that she simply must find out, and she could not do so unless she got round Bertha, "but I seem to be rather muddled about it all."

Bertha settled her habit primly, and folded her arms. "Your guardian is coming to fetch you away," she said. "He is rich. Apparently your mother left you some money, and you will be able to travel, and to go about."

Doreen stared at her. She had never thought that she might have money. She suddenly realised that with this the key to the whole world lay in her hand. She would travel. Places had absorbed her; they had been names on a map, specks on a globe, but at the same time they had been alluring and she had longed to visit them, instead of being shut up here on the hill with an exquisite view of the *Jungfrau* and no more.

She was at the age that wants more.

Life is so full, and the cage which holds youth back is always so cramping.

"Did you say I'd be rich?" she asked.

"I don't know about being rich, but I do know that you certainly have some money. The letters were on the Mother's desk today, and I helped her reply. The gentleman arrived only half an hour ago; I let him into the place my-

self. It is my duty," and she stared primly at the view beyond the convent garden.

"Yes," said Doreen.

There was nothing more to learn and she knew it. Bertha was one of those stolid people, absorbed with a sense of duty, and she could not see beyond herself. She did not want to see beyond. The convent was her world, and she asked never to leave it again. She liked being here.

But for Doreen, the doors were opening, and she wanted to dance with delight. Bertha went off to the herbs. She turned back her big sleeves and fixed them into the leather belt that she wore round her plump little waist; she bent over the mint, and the thyme, and the "old man", and the sweet essence of all three came to Doreen.

Then she turned and saw emerging from the convent itself the Mother Superior, in her thick black habit, leaning on a stick, for she walked badly with the years, and beside her a tall man, erect, with a face that looked to the sun. This must be the guardian.

"He isn't really so very old," she thought quickly, and went to meet them.

CHAPTER II

In the spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd
dove;

In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to
thoughts of love.

TENNYSON.

CHARLES FAYRE was in the late fifties, but he was one of those men whom novelists call well-preserved. Life had been good to him and he had suffered little in his passage through time. Born with a golden spoon in his mouth, the only son of parents who late in life had realised their dream was to be realised, he had been idolised in his childhood.

Clifton Hall was his, as it had belonged to generations of ancestors before him. Clifton, with its long pine walk, and its lake split into two, where the swans rode like white viking ships, and the cedars crept down to the water's edge and stared profoundly at their mirrored reflections there.

He remembered it as a child when he clung to his mother's full skirts and walked to the water to feed those swans; he always thought of it when the rhododendrons had been in bloom, pinkly pearl against their dark dull leaves. He always remembered it when the first daffodils came thrusting up through the grass in the pine walk, and the boughs thickened, and the birds nested. He loved the place. Clifton and all the tradition for which it stood was his by

birthright. His father grew very old and was tied to the chair in the library, and young Charles took up the law and worked hard at the Bar. Not that he needed a career—careers were not necessary to the owner of Clifton—but he believed that no man was justified in living unless he could pull his weight with it.

Because he was keen and clever, and because he put his back into anything that he undertook, Charles had done well.

There had been one episode in his life, and one only. It had been with Sidonie Clare. He had gone over to Paris on business. There was a case pending, and evidence was wanted from an hotel there. Charles went over. A friend lent him a flat in the Rue des Etoiles, at Easter, when the chestnuts were in thick bud, and the old women were selling violets outside the *Madelaine*.

On the second night he went to a music-hall show. It was gay. It was amusing, and he was in the mood to be amused. There was a little dancer there, he was told, called Dragon Fly. Nobody knew very much about it, save that it was a marvellous dance, in which the dragon fly spun out and over the audience.

"Right, I'll see it," Charles told himself.

The rest of the programme was ordinary, amusing, sufficient to hold the interest but nothing very out of the usual. But the moment that Dragon Fly appeared he knew that it was a different thing altogether.

The stage was lit dimly, and it reminded him of the banks of Clifton lake in summer. Reeds

and edges, a smirch of dark weed across the surface of the water, bulrushes in bud, a lily here or there, and suddenly into it the swinging of a fantastic little shape. A young boy dressed as a dragon fly. His lithe body scintillated in green and purple and bewildering blue. His wings hummed and vibrated. He danced hither and thither, and once, for a second, Charles caught sight of the small puckish face, with the dark intelligent eyes, and the fair hair swept back, and the thin jaw with the little tense mouth.

There was expression there that arrested Charles's attention, life, tensivity. Something that he did not understand.

The Dragon Fly danced. Then came the final moment when it swung out across the audience, with the whisper of drums and the arpeggio music of harps. And the reeds and the sedges on the stage, and the smirch of dark weed across the surface of the still water, all reminded him so much of home.

The fly quivered, there was a tense moment when in mid-air it seemed to stay, and he, looking up into that little face, saw terror there. He knew that something had gone wrong. This was not the usual exhibition. It was all very well for the fools in the stalls to applaud madly, and to call and to cry "*Bien, Encore*". This was something that should not have been.

He knew that the wire had snapped.

All in the instant, before the harps had time to change their singing arpeggios, before the drums could stop their whispering, the little Dragon Fly fell.

Charles was ready for it. He caught the boy as he came. Caught him, and together they were knocked back by the impact into the box where he sat.

For a moment everything was confused. There was the sound of the theatre rising and screaming—women get hysterical on any count—there was the sound of people rushing to the door of the box, and of the manager peering round the corner, with his pumpkin-shaped face in which two eyes looked like a couple of bull's-eyes too long sucked.

"I'm all right," said Charles, and he bent over the boy. He did not seem to be hurt. He opened his eyes pathetically.

"Don't let them take me away," he begged.

"But your home? Shall I take you there?"

"I have no home."

"But you must live somewhere."

"Yes," said the boy quickly, "like a rat, in the cellars of Paris. Just like a rat!" And as the manager and others came crowding in and would have torn him from Charles's arms, "Don't let me go away with them. Take me with you. Just for tonight. I would do no harm. Just for tonight."

It struck him that the lad was hysterical from shock, that he needed quiet, a good doctor, a drink. If it were true, and he was living like a rat in the cellars of France, then that was no place to receive him after a shock of this kind.

"It's all right. Call a car. I'll take the boy back to my apartment, and he shall see my doctor."

"But, Monsieur . . ."

"Nonsense, there are no buts; I'll take him with me."

"Monsieur does not understand . . ." The little manager was waving gesticulating hands as though he would dismiss the whole affair.

"Oh, rats to that," said Charles.

He gathered the boy up in his arms and pushed his way out of the box into the passage beyond. There was a lot of red plush, and pink plaster cupids, a great deal of ornamentation and a crowd of people. Looking back for one moment he saw a most extraordinary look on the manager's pumpkin face. It was a leer.

In the darkness of the car he chafed the boy's limp hands. He had an idea that the little fellow had fainted. Never mind, a spot of brandy the moment they got to the flat would put matters right, and his friend had been very munificent with leaving a bottle or two of the best behind him.

He carried the boy indoors.

The *concierge* expressed no interest; it might have been the most ordinary thing in the world to see a tenant marching into the flats carrying a boy dressed as a dragon fly with his wings trailing in the road behind him.

"*Bon soir, Monsieur.*"

"*Bon soir.*"

The lift took him up to the flat, and, hampered with the boy, he had difficulty in opening the door. He turned on the light. The room was grotesque, furnished in Chinese fashion, with scarlet walls which would have driven Charles

crazy if he had had to live with them for any length of time.

He laid the lad down on the pale blue sofa and opened his tunic, lapis-lazuli in colour, shot through with purple. As he did so he suddenly turned sharply.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "It's a girl!"

She opened her eyes and stared at him. He saw that she was one of the most striking-looking girls that he had ever seen, and extremely young. He felt a sense of outrage that she should ever have been allowed to do anything so dangerous as this dragon-fly dance, with the flying out across the audience and always the chance that the wire might snap.

She struggled up, and sat there staring at him; then she burst into tears. "Don't let me go back to that again. It frightens me so. It always has frightened me. I always knew that one day I should fall"

Quietly and with determination he told her, "You shall not go back."

He meant it.

That night they sat and talked, and he learnt something of the life that had jostled this girl into the amusement world. It was a very old story. Her people were quite humble, they came from Provence, and all their living centred round the ~~apricot orchards~~ there. Their little minds were for ever with the fruit. They lived for it and could not think beyond it, she said. To them life was bound up in the apricot harvest, and they did not care for their only child.

She had gathered apricots and had worked with

them since she was quite tiny. And all the time she had known that she had this passion for dancing and for play-acting. When the fair came to the town everybody went to it, and there she saw the play-actors. The circus would come with its big top, and its tumbling amusing clowns, and the prancing little cream ponies, which side-stepped round the ring, and the lovely lady in gauze and spangles who stood atop them and blew kisses to the applauding audience.

When I grow up I will go with the circus, the child had promised herself.

Her people did not know. Had she told them they would have condemned it as being nonsense and would have dismissed it. They thought of nothing save of the little farm with its one great room and the staircase climbing out of it, and the doves on the roof, and the apricots stretching around in their little orchards.

They would not have cared.

Night after night she practised the tricks in her own room, tricks that she had seen at the circus. So when she was thirteen she was lithe and lissom; she could turn cartwheels and was already something of a contortionist. She could stand upon a big ball and roll it along under her feet. Because she was so keenly interested she applied herself to learning these tricks, and when she was just fourteen and the fair came again, she went round to the ring-master and offered herself.

"See, I can dance," she told him.

There, on the rough field, she danced for him. There was the noise of the rest of the fair, the

shouts with the coconut shies, and the rifle booths, and the fat lady and the dwarfs. The ring-master glanced at her. He asked where she came from and she told him that she was an orphan. He believed it.

"I can come tomorrow," she promised.

On the morrow, when the fair journeyed on its way to another town in Provence, the child was with them. From that moment her career began.

She was clever and intelligent and willing to learn. Within a few months she was here in Paris. She was part of an act. Before long she was a dragon fly, but she hated the work because she was always so afraid that she would fall.

"You see," she told him, "I did fall. I knew. I knew rightly."

He kept her at his flat that night, watching her asleep and thinking how like a flower she was, and wondering how it came to be that he was not in love with her. The next day he saw a friend of his who ran a theatre and he got her an interview with a big producer.

Again her intelligence won through and she managed to get a part in a forthcoming play. It was her big chance and she grabbed it with both hands. When Charles came to Paris again she was a star.

Under it all the child of the apricot orchards stayed. He always recognised the traits. She could never entirely stamp out that early upbringing and the fact that she was born of poor blood. The leopard cannot change his spots. She would talk of Charles caressingly. She would

speaking of him as being her dear old friend, and would come to him for counsel, as often as not eschewing that counsel and refusing to listen to him.

"You are always so solemn," she would say.

"Life is a solemn thing," he said.

"Not for me," and she would laugh.

She was effervescent; the bubbles in the champagne of life, the star in its sky. She would never settle down, she would never become orthodox or real, she would always be the dragon fly which skims about on surfaces, and he knew it.

He did not go too deeply into matters.

Ten years later, when she was twenty-five, and he past his mid thirties, he received a sudden little agonised letter from her. He was at Clifton at the time, walking in the garden there. It was his own now. People looked at him admiringly, and he kept his estate well. The neighbourhood wondered whom he would marry, and marriage-making mothers brought their pretty daughters to tea, and looked at him hopefully. But they did not realise that Charles was not the marrying kind. He did not know why but no woman had ever appealed to him in that way, not even little Sidonie, when she had lain in his flat in Paris, a bruised little dragon fly of a child.

They brought the letter to him when he was by the lake, watching by strange irony the dragon flies flitting about in the sunshine. Bronze, and purple, and lapis-lazuli, glittering against the dark reeds and the weed which at this time of the year smeared the surface of the water.

Sidonie wanted to see him. Surely it would be possible for him to make a trip? She was in great distress and needed a friend, heavily underlined, because she was one of those people who are always so emphatic.

For a moment he wondered if this were some fool's errand, she was an impetuous little person, and once before had sent him scuttling across the Channel only because a love affair had gone wrong, and she had to protest that she would die without Guillaume, and would he please do something to bring Guillaume back to her side. Then, reading more carefully, he came to the conclusion that this time she really was anxious, and he went at once.

He found her obviously ill. She had changed her gay apartment with the peach-organdi frilled curtains, and the impertinent little window boxes which brimmed with pink geraniums and smilax fern, and she was living in a poorer back street. He had noticed as he passed down the main street that her name was no longer outside the theatre, but he had merely thought perhaps she was rehearsing for a new play.

Now he found her in a cheaper street, with a seedy-looking room, and dingy curtains, and something about the furniture that depressed him. It was poor. It was not the kind of setting that he always imagined for Sidonie.

"What is it?" he asked.

For a little while she would not tell him. Then she confessed the truth. There had been a lover. Always before she had loved where there was money or where there was the chance of fame.

She had been wise. And, because her head had guided her rather than her heart, she had never allowed the affair to run away with her. She had always been able to keep a rein upon her emotions. But it had been different with Henri.

He said: "What about Guillaume?"

She smiled then, wanly, and he noted how transparent her cheek had become, and how she had lost her colour. "That was nothing," she said; "it is true that I did care for Guillaume a little, but not like this. This was something tremendous."

He noted the "was". "Go on," he said.

Henri had obviously been a spoilt child, the son of a marquis, and he had believed that Paris was made for his enjoyment. He had never meant marriage, though he had dazzled Sidonie with the idea of it. She had seen herself suddenly rising so far above that apricot orchard at Provence that the wonder bemused her. Besides, by that time she was in love with the young man, a polished aristocrat, who knew the way to make love.

It had started at spring, when the chestnuts burst and the old women sell violets outside the *Madelaine*, she explained. He understood!

For four months it had gone on, well into the summer, when there were roses, and the little tables in the *Bois*, and all Paris so happy and so gay.

She explained that she had never given the future a thought. With the casual indifference to what might come she had lived each day for itself. She believed that they would marry. She

thought that ahead lay an eternity of time, all as happy as these days, all as lovely, then suddenly Henri returned to his home in the south.

She knew now that he had grown tired. At the time she had made a dozen different excuses for him, all those foolish little lover's excuses which pour out so easily. She had even made herself believe in them. He would come back to marry her. This was some tiresome business which dragged him away, and it irked him as it irked her. The parting was only for a few days really.

Then, when Henri had gone, she woke up to the truth. It had not needed his final letter to convince her of it. To him she was only an actress, his to play with for a time, but the idea of marriage had been mere foolishness. He could not marry a girl like she was. What would his mother say? His mother! She choked a little at the thought.

None of it would have mattered very much, it would have been something that she could have forgotten in hard work, she supposed, only she had been so stupid. She had loved him so passionately that she had wanted to be wholly his.

She had given herself to him childishly happily. She had never supposed that anything like this could happen.

Now she was going to have a baby!

She sat there limply, staring at Charles across the small, dull room. She had not a friend in the world to whom she could turn. What did she do now?

"I will have to think," said he.

It was Charles who got the cheque from a most reluctant Henri, who paid to save publicity. It was Charles who remembered that he had had an old Swiss nurse when he was a boy, and that her address was still in the little red leather address book that his mother had left in the library when she died. He looked it up. He arranged for Sidonie to make the journey into Switzerland, and to stay with old Kaput. Old Kaput was very kind. She was trained in such things. She did not understand the fierce resentment of the girl against the child who was coming to her.

"When the baby is born, you will love it," she promised.

"I do not want a baby," Sidonie replied.

She wrote pathetic letters to Charles, letters brimming over with gratitude for all that he had done for her, yet letters which mourned her own fate and were full of self-pity. In the summertime, when there were scabious blowing on the hillside, and the big-eyed daisies, the child was born. A girl. Old Kaput had been wrong, for Sidonie took no interest in her daughter. Charles, when he came over, took more interest than she did. Now all that Sidonie wanted was to get back to the theatre and to start again, building up her career just where she had left off.

"Kaput can see after Doreen?" she said.

That was arranged.

In some ways she disappointed Charles, because he had hoped that she would learn to love the child, and he felt sorry for the baby who

had caused so much trouble, and was blamed for it.

Sidonie went back to Paris, but before she went she appointed Charles guardian of the child should anything happen to her. She had a moment of penitence, a moment when she regretted so much, and thought of the child apprehensively. She wanted to help Doreen.

"You will be her guardian?" she wrote to Charles at Clifton. "After all I shall not die, I am much younger than you are, and there is little doubt that you will ever have to act. Say that you will let me name you?"

He accepted it as a trust.

For the next few years he heard little. When he saw Sidonie he understood that she had not seen her daughter.. Kaput was dead. That had made for complications, but Sidonie had managed to get over them. She had gone herself to the tiny village in the pass, and had made some enquiries, and she had taken the little girl to the convent. It gave a very good education, she explained, and nuns could be relied upon to be very kind to children. She was perfectly satisfied about Doreen.

She herself did well.

The career which had suffered such an unfortunate check went forward. She had no more love affairs. She accepted a certain sum from Henri twice yearly and invested it for her child. She never saw him again. When Charles saw her she did not mention him, and he believed that all that welter of emotion that she had once felt for him was dead and gone.

The accident happened many years later. She was dancing in a show, an exquisite golden-haired creature, in her tulle frock with the trails of roses about it. A fire started. How it began nobody ever lived to tell, it may have been somebody smoking carelessly, where smoking was always forbidden, it may have been the fusing of a light. But suddenly a yellow flame licked affectionately along the scenery towards her. She watched as if mesmerised by it, too frightened to scream! The asbestos curtain stuck half-way. It was old and uneasy; the audience scrambled for the exits. Within a few moments the lovely young woman in roses and tulle was merely ashes in a theatre fast being destroyed by flame. She was only one of dozens to lose their lives there that night.

For a long time Charles did little about it. Frankly he did not know what to do. He wrote to the Mother Superior at the convent, who replied that the child was interested in her studies and doing well, and she thought that it would be a pity to disturb her or to make any change in her life.

Charles did not know what change he could make, for if he brought her away to live at Clifton, he knew that the neighbourhood would instantly seize upon her as being one of the indiscretions of his own youth, and the scandal caused would react upon them both. He left her there.

On her eighteenth birthday, he thought, I will go out and make some arrangement. She has some money. Her mother left a comfortable sum, and she could take up some career, but not

the stage. He felt that he did not want another girl to be ruined by that life.

He came to the convent in the middle afternoon and was received by the Mother in her plain unvarnished little room. She told him about Doreen quite simply. She was explicit.

"She is a sweet girl," she said, "but not fitted for a career. It would be wrong for her to go upon the stage; she has not the right temperament. She is good with children; she is more the housewifely type."

He said yes, and made up his mind that the girl he was about to see would be in that state known as "the awkward age", probably fat and unpromising! The Mother said that Doreen had studied hard, that she had passed her examinations, that she was musical, that she painted nicely, and that she was sure that he would find her most entertaining.

"Come," she said, "we will go into the garden and find her."

He saw her from a long way off. He saw the little white-gowned form of the novice as she moved away and the girl herself, slender, small, with her mother's pale gold hair, and, as he came closer, the same trustful dark eyes, and three-cornered puckish little face. Nothing unwieldy or of the awkward age here, he thought.

His heart missed a beat, because the sight of Doreen sent him so far back in life, to that day when he had carried a dragon fly in his arms.

He went forward to meet her.

CHAPTER III

A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute.

SHAKESPEARE.

BOTH were astonished with one another. Charles had expected a lumpy schoolgirl, not a very lovely rose-like creature, with dark enquiring eyes, and hair like the first Lent lilies of early spring. Doreen had expected him to be old; she had thought that he would walk with a stick perhaps, and have a cough. Instead, Charles in the fifties was a very good-looking man. He was as upright as in youth. His hair greying had left him with a swarthy skin, and fine grey eyes. He was obviously sympathetic and understanding.

She had asked if he were married, and when the Mother had told her no, had expected a querulous old bachelor; instead she saw this man, six foot if an inch, tall, commanding, and she knew instantly that she was attracted to him.

The Mother introduced them, then went away.

Doreen said: "It is very pleasant in the arbour; the clematis is out—it is the sweet-smelling kind. Would you care to sit there?"

He said: "I like the view here. Is that the *Jungfrau*?"

"Yes. You can just see it peeping through the pass."

"It must have been beautiful to have known this view through all the seasons of the year? 'A

heavenly spot. I had no idea that it was so enchanting."

"I don't find it enchanting. I have been here so long. Lately I have wanted to get away so much, oh, so dreadfully. You have come to take me away?"

"I have come here to talk about it," he agreed. "I want to know what you want to do with your life."

She said: "I've got a little money, haven't I?"

"You have got a comfortable little income. Your mother left it for you."

"Could I travel?"

He smiled at her in some amusement. "I don't see how anybody as young and unsophisticated as yourself could travel alone, and you have not the money to pay somebody to travel with you."

She said, "Oh!" disappointedly.

"You see," he said, "at eighteen you are not very old, are you?"

"I feel very old," she told him.

"Next to the travelling, what would you like to do?"

She turned to him rather pathetically. "I want to get away from here. Could you take me back to England with you? Couldn't I stay at your home for a little while? After all, you are my guardian. Don't guardians see after the people they guard?"

It was curious that he had been playing with this idea from the moment that they had met. He had thought how excellent it would be if he could take her back with him. After all, he was

in the mid-fifties. There could not be a scandal. All through the years he had purposely left her here because he had thought it impossible to take her to Clifton; now here he was thinking of it.

The difficulties melted.

He might be a fool, he might be blind to all those knotty points which presented themselves, he might be quite crazy, but there was something pitifully young and needing protection in this girl. She needed home life. She needed to be with people who would care for her.

"But supposing I do take you home with me, wouldn't you find that dull, too?" he asked.

"I'd adore it. You don't mean you will really do it? You don't mean that you'll really take me with you?" She clapped her hands excitedly. She got up quickly and danced like an enthusiastic child. Having seen her in this mood there was no going back.

He said: "Supposing you come down into the village for tea?"

"We are not allowed down in the village."

"But of course you are, with me. Do you mean that you have never been down there?"

"Only about once a year. If we go out on a botany walk it is always up the hills. The nuns do not like us mixing with other people. They never take us down to the houses or the shops."

"Then we will go down there at once."

She said: "I shall have to ask permission."

"No, I will do that for you."

She went indoors for her big wide hat, and as she passed Bertha she smiled at her and tweaked her habit. "I am going down into the village."

Fancy that! I am going down into the village."

Bertha looked at her primly.

"I would not want to go down into the village," she said.

Doreen and Charles walked down the little road, dipping down to the houses with the wavy roofs, and the balconies, and the flowers brimming over the porches and window-boxes. They walked into the little inn and ordered tea, and the host brought it to them, and cream cakes of the kind that only came to the convent on festivals or when it was a saint's day. Even then they were not so full of cream nor so capped with sugar as these were.

"They're marvellous," said Doreen.

She sat there looking very like a picture, a picture of the world a hundred years ago, he thought; she wore the plain grey frock that all the pupils wore, and the wide leghorn hat with its pale blue ribbon. It was queer that the first time that he had met her mother she had been dressed like a dragon fly, a dress daringly modern, so much so that it had jarred on him, but the child was looking like some Victorian miss from the middle of last century.

He found himself watching her.

She was at her ease. She chattered gaily and asked innumerable questions. She wanted to know things about Clifton. She wanted to hear what sort of a life he lived there, and why he had never married. She asked nothing about her mother.

At last he said: "Don't you want to hear something about your mother?"

She said: "No."

"But," he said, "we all owe a debt to our mothers. Haven't you thought of that?"

"Yes, I have thought of that." She was very grave now. "But, you see, Mother didn't really love me. If she had done she would never have left me all alone here. She would not have been ashamed of me. She *was* ashamed of me, you know."

It was so true that he did not attempt to deny it.

"She would not have behaved like she did. I have been happy here, it is true, but, oh, so dull. I don't believe people ought to be so dull. When I have a daughter I won't leave her alone. I'll want her to be with me always. Always," she repeated insistently.

He was sure that she would.

"So I don't want to hear about my mother," she said.

All the same, he told her about the way she had danced, about the way that she had looked, and also about the way that she had suffered. "Your father," he said, "was the one to blame. She loved him so much and then, when he deserted her, she was so unhappy."

"But why did that make her want to make me unhappy, too?"

He saw here something which had grown up with the years. Poor little Sidonie! She had made some bad mistakes in life, and bringing up Doreen as she had done had been one of them.

"Perhaps," he said, "you ought to blame me, too, because since I became your guardian I have

left you here. I ought to have come out to see you before."

"I don't care. You have come now, and you'll take me away? You *will* take me away?"

"Perhaps if I do it will be that you long again for the peace of this convent. It has something that the world cannot give, you know."

"You talk like the Mother."

"I don't feel like the Mother," he said, and stopped abruptly, because he was not quite sure how he did feel about this child. She was disturbing in a new way. He liked the way that she looked at him steadily, as though she would stare him through. He liked her certainty of her own feelings. Doreen knew what she wanted.

They finished tea. They walked out into the street again, and up the hill towards the convent.

"How soon can you be ready to come back to England?" he asked.

"Back to England? I've never been there before."

"Then shall we say to England for the first time?"

"I could start now," she declared.

"Tomorrow, or the day after?" he suggested.

"You promise me that faithfully? I have a feeling that you'll disappear, and I don't think that I could bear that. I'd hate to think that you might drift away. It has been so lovely."

"I won't drift away. We'll send a cable now, to tell them to get a room ready for you at Clifton Hall. You shall see me word it."

They dispatched it together from the little post-office half-way up the hill.

"Now are you satisfied?" he asked.

"More than satisfied, and happy. Oh, I am so happy." She stopped suddenly. "What do I call you?"

"I think you'd better call me just Charles."

She asked, "You don't feel that it is a bit too familiar?" and smiled.

"Of course not. You couldn't call me 'Mr.,' and 'Uncle' is stupid. I think if you just call me Charles."

"I'd like to," she replied, and said it over and over again to herself.

She went back to the convent radiantly happy. She went into the dormitory with the other girls and curled herself up in bed. The stars came out and stared in at the uncurtained windows. At half-past nine a nun came in to stop all talking. So all through the years a nun had always come in at the same hour, walking like a ghost, her hands in her long sleeves, her head a little bowed as though with the weight of her veil.

At Clifton no nun would pass through the dormitory. It would not be a dormitory at all. It was goodbye to all this. "Oh, I'm happy," she thought as she fell asleep. She could not believe that so much which was wonderful was going to happen to her.

CHAPTER IV

God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers,
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,
A gauntlet with a gift in't.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

It was curious that Doreen had not thought that the saying goodbye to the Mother would hurt quite a lot. Youth, impatient to be on with life, does not reckon on the accounts which life has to offer.

When, for the last time, she came into that quiet room, with the glimpse of the herb garden beyond and the smell of the herbs coming in through the window, Doreen felt a strange feeling of alarm. Alarm that she would not be able to deal with the problems the world might bring to her, problems that she in her turn would not offer, as before, to the Mother to solve for her.

Until this moment she had been sure of herself. Now she knew that she was no longer so certain.

"So you are going away?" said the Mother quietly. She had always been the same. Nothing changed her. The years passed on, and wrinkled her face and left the trace of time about her, but the eyes were always calm, they faced joy and sorrow with the same trust. There was something that Doreen hated to part with in the unchanging face of the Mother.

"I am going to England."

"I hope that you will be very happy, my child."

She said quickly: "Oh, I know I shall be. I want to say thank you for all you have done for me. I . . . I do not know where I should have been without you."

The Mother smiled, and all the time her eyes were watching Doreen as if she were dubious, as if, in some strange manner, she doubted the happiness that the future could give to her. She said: "If ever you want peace, and quiet, and rest from the world, these doors are always open to you, my dear, you know that."

"Thank you." But at this particular moment, excited at the thought of getting away, only anxious to close those doors behind her for ever, Doreen could not think of anything like returning.

The Mother got up and stood there, one old gnarled hand on her stick handle, her quiet eyes still seeking Doreen's face as though searching for a missing emotion. She said: "Peace be with you, my child, but I feel that one day you will come back and we shall meet again. I hope so. I hate losing touch with the pupils I have loved."

There was something about her voice which left a pain in Doreen's heart. "You've been very good" was all that she could say, and she stumbled out into the cloister beyond, where the nuns were passing to Benediction, like shadows, dark shadows that she would not see again.

"Life," she thought, "will be so curious away from all this, so strange."

Now her things were all packed and made

ready for her. The nuns had chosen her a few quite simple clothes, not the type that she would have chosen for herself, but Charles had asked them to buy some things. He had said that they could get other clothes when they got to England. Anything would do for now. The other girls thought that it was all thrilling. It was amazing that a good-looking guardian should appear and take her off to a big mansion miles away.

"But he is old," said one of the girls.

"He doesn't *seem* old," said Doreen.

They started together, and she saw the village die away and fade from her map. The Mother might think that she would return, but she herself doubted it very much indeed.

The journey was all so strange that she could not talk. Charles bought her papers to read, and she pretended to read them, but it was only pretence because she was far more interested in the view beyond the windows. It represented the world that she had always wanted to see.

They spent the night in Paris. There they were taken for father and daughter; it amused Charles, but somehow she fiercely resented it.

"It's so silly."

"I don't see why! That is my relationship to you as your guardian really."

"You don't seem like my father."

"I don't want to seem like your father, but it is a father's authority that I have over you, all the same."

He took her shopping and they bought clothes and perfume and little satin slippers. He took her into the *Bois*, and he showed her where her

mother had lived and the theatre where she had danced. He even took her to a side street where there was a tall row of new flats. On the wall was a tiny plaque stating that it was here the Théâtre Frivolity had been burnt down.

This was where Doreen's mother had died!

It was strange that she could not feel sorry for a mother that she had never known. She wondered if Charles thought that she was being callous, she wondered if she really was callous, but at the same time she could not help it. She nursed a grudge against that unknown mother, and the feeling ended there.

Next morning they started for England.

She would never forget the feeling when they went on board the little steamer at Calais, when they started across the sea itself, palely grey-blue, almost the colour of the uniform that she had worn for so many years, and with tiny enquiring ruffles on it, like frills of lace. She would never forget the first sight of those white cliffs, about which she had read so often, and she stood against the taffrail staring. Gulls against the skyline, those startlingly white cliffs, and beyond the hazy outline of a great little island.

"It feels like coming home," she said.

"It is coming home!"

She was disappointed in the dreariness of the station, drab after the spruceness of Switzerland. No baskets of flowers hanging from the roof and on the lamp-posts, nothing brushed and trim. She had not expected it to be so dreary. There was a light drizzle falling, too, but it cleared away as the train steamed out of the station and started

on its journey through Kent. And now she saw the green fields, and the hop gardens, and the little oasts in pairs, nuzzling together like kindly turtle-doves, and the quiet farms, and the small churches.

"It isn't like Switzerland," she said suddenly. She had been leaning well forward staring out of the window at the view. She had now arrived at this tremendous conclusion.

"No, it isn't like Switzerland."

So flat, she thought, no mountains in the distance, no height. For one dreadful moment she wondered if she was going to be able to live with this. It would be quite terrible if she grew hungry for the mountains again. She refused to think of such a thing.

"Oh, look!" said Charles suddenly.

She followed the direction in which he was pointing and saw a black and white bird rising out of the meadow and flying towards them.

"What is it?"

"A single magpie! That's unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"Yes, one for sorrow."

For a moment she did not know what to do, but stared helplessly at him. "You don't believe in those silly things, do you?" she asked. "I mean, you can't really think that seeing one bird alone can bring you sorrow?"

"The extraordinary thing is that I do."

"You *do*?"

"Yes," and he laughed. "When I was a boy I had a funny old superstitious nurse. She just lived by that kind of thing. I shall never forget

her anxiety when a robin came and strutted on the nursery window-sill; she thought that she would be sure to die before the day was out."

"But it's nonsense."

He shook his head.

"I don't think it is as much nonsense as all that. There is a great deal in these old superstitions, and I've read a lot about them."

"Isn't that rather silly? I mean, the more you read the more frightened you get, surely? It only makes you know of so many more superstitions to be frightened of."

"That's true!" He sat there surveying her gravely. "You've got an old head on young shoulders, you know. Perhaps it was pandering to it. Superstition brings you more sorrow than joy, I am sure."

"And it is so idiotic," she said quite firmly.

Yet when they got out at Victoria, and he remembered too late that he had left his scarf and gloves on the boat, he blamed it on the magpie.

"I knew something would happen," he said.

"But that had happened before you saw the magpie."

Then she laughed. She laughed gaily with the easy happy-go-lucky joy of eighteen. And he, listening to it, realised that with the aid of that laughter he might cure himself of a habit that had worried him all his life. She was quite right, superstition *was* idiotic!

CHAPTER V

Three ducks on a pond,
The blue sky beyond,
White clouds on the wing.
What a little thing
To remember for years,
To remember with tears.

ALLINGHAM.

THEY came at evening to Clifton Hall.

In the train down Charles had told her a little about it. She had known that it was a big old house standing in several acres and that it had belonged to his family since the Stuarts were on the throne. He told her that the servants there had grown old in the service of the family, and for the first time he mentioned Miss Neale.

"Who is she?" Doreen had asked.

She had had an idea that she and Charles would be alone here, and somehow she did not want a third person. She wanted him to show her England; to take her about; to introduce her to that new life that she had longed for such a while to enter into.

Charles explained Miss Neale. She was in the mid-forties. She had been a remote connection of his mother's, not really a relation. She had earned her living from the time that she was very young, first as a clerk in an hotel, and later as a manageress. She was not pretty, she was just very ordinary, and when she had lost her job it had been at the very time that the old

housekeeper at Clifton had died. He had sent for Miss Neale. She had jumped at the offer and she made a magnificent housekeeper; in fact, the place had never run so smoothly before.

"You'll like her," he said, but he did not say it with any assurance, because in his heart he only hoped that they would like one another.

He had explained to Miss Neale before he made this journey, and she had stood there staring at him as though she did not know what he meant. "Will you be bringing the girl back?"

"No, no, of course not," he said.

He did not know what Hilda Neale thought; she was a little mottled wisp of a woman who had never been pretty and who now, in the mid-forties, was definitely plain. People had teased him and had said that when she came to Clifton she had hoped to be something more than housekeeper. Well, he had no intention of marrying, so she had better rest assured on that point. He knew that she did not like the idea of his travelling to Switzerland to see some strange girl, even though it might be (as Miss Neale put it to herself) the daughter of an old love. He had wired to say that Doreen would be returning with him.

Hilda Neale had expected that telegram. When it actually came she knew what it was, but, being strangely inconsistent, she was furiously indignant about it. She had gone up to her own room to open it, the big comfortable room allotted to her, and she had flung herself down on the bed there.

"It's *his* child," she told herself viciously. "It's his child, and he hopes to bamboozle us all that way."

She got the spare wing ready! Forget-me-not blue chintzes, coral pink carpet, and the view over the lake so lovely in spring when the laburnums and lilacs were out; now the roses decked the pergola which went down to the lake. To Miss Neale the roses were significant.

She said little to the servants, but it was enough to let them know that she disapproved. She went to the doorway and stood there in readiness to meet the car, and she saw it turn in at the lodge gates. She'll be pretty, she thought, over-conscious that this was an attribute to which she had never had any claim; she'll be lovely!

The moment the car drew up alongside the door she saw that Doreen was even lovelier than she had expected. She had hoped for that first loveliness which comes to the very young girl, but which is fleeting and passes. It is the beauty of dawn, which is overrun by the morning.

"Welcome," she said primly.

Doreen looked at Miss Neale, who seemed to be very old to her. Wizen. Plain. An insignificant little woman in unbecoming clothes. But she could not mistake the hostility in the eyes and the slight twitching of the mouth.

"How do you do?" said Doreen.

Miss Neale led the way up the winding stairs to the landing above. She opened the door of the spare wing. "These are your rooms," she said, but there was nothing unbending about her tone, nothing that was not hostile and severe.

Doreen went inside. It was just as she had pictured it, only bigger, only grander. The soft coral pink carpet into which her feet sank, the bed with its forget-me-not blue hangings, and the view beyond the windows.

"It's so lovely," she said.

But there were no mountains. It was queer that a heart could hunger for mountains, which she had always felt had hemmed her in and had cut her off from the world. It was queer that she could want them so much.

"Tea is on the loggia, when you're ready," said Miss Neale.

She went outside and shut the door.

She doesn't like me, thought Doreen, and then quickly she banished that idea, because it was crazy to take dislikes and to jump at conclusions. She brushed her hair and went down the stairs. Charles was waiting for her in the hall, and they went through the library on to the loggia.

"What a marvellous room," she said of the library. The carved ceiling, the walls of books, and the picture of Charles hanging in its heavy gilt frame over the fireplace.

"The day I took silk," he said.

"It's a lovely picture of a lovely person."

"You're very flattering. Don't you think anybody would have been lovely who took you away from school?"

She shook her head. "I think you are much nicer than the ordinary lovely person," she said, and linked her hand affectionately in his arm.

Like that they stepped on to the loggia.

Miss Neale was in charge of the teapot. It was

a shock to Doreen, because she had thought that Miss Neale was a paid housekeeper, and had never supposed that she would share meals with them. But as yet Doreen was to discover that Charles was extremely good to his employees. Hilda Neale went about with him a great deal, and he had, in his own mind, decided that it would be impossible to take Doreen back to Clifton with him unless Miss Neale had been there to play the rôle of chaperon.

It was absurd that in her childish daydreams Doreen should have thought "I'll pour out the tea for him," and was now disappointed to find that somebody else was in charge. She sat down very quietly.

The loggia was lovely. A geranium climbed with its ivy leaves and its deep pink profusion of flowers. A banksia rose sent out an essence from its small yellow button blossoms. Beyond lay the lawn, leading down to the lake, and the dragon flies were flying there amongst the reeds and the rushes, just as Charles had told her they would be flying.

"We'll go out and see them afterwards," he said.

Tea was difficult. Miss Neale was a woman of moods, and Charles knew very well that she was now indulging in one. She would not speak unless spoken to, and he foresaw that there might be a difficult scene later. Miss Neale had a passion for moods, and for scenes; they were her only indulgence in an inhibited life, and the servants knew all about that. Charles was able to manage her, but he very much disliked having

to stir himself from his ordinary good-humoured moods to deal with her.

"Anything the matter?" he asked her quite deliberately, knowing that everything was the matter. "You look as though the place had been burnt down in my absence."

"Clifton is working beautifully, thank you," she said.

"Nothing gone wrong in the neighbourhood?"

"Nothing as far as I know. I don't go out much, of course, and I never listen to scandals, so learn nothing. Not but what there are scandals round here, and there'll be more." For a moment she glanced at Doreen. He saw it.

He said: "I always say if people want to talk you won't stop them. Let them talk. Pay no attention. It is the only thing to do."

She did not agree or disagree, so that he knew in her heart she disagreed.

"If you've finished," he said to Doreen, "we'll go for a stroll round the lake."

It was cut into two parts. The upper lake lay in the actual gardens of the house, which ended in a sluice, allowing the water to drip down into the lower lake, which curled into the park. Here there was a small wood, exquisite with bluebells in the spring, and now a tangle of eglantine and wild rose, under tall trees. The park rose in a little hill crowned with a tiny plantation of pines. The lake itself had an island on it, and here the swans had built themselves a big byre of a nest, and had hatched in June.

The pen was sailing down the lake like a proud white vessel, followed closely by six dark smudges,

which were the signets, bright-eyed but dusty little birds. The old cob, his head back and his wing-feathers arranged like a cup, was sailing in a rage. He hated people walking alongside the lake when his wife and young were a-sail. He went to and fro indignantly.

They walked right round, with the pale evening light on the park, and they came back through the rose-garden at the far end with the summer-house beyond it.

"Is it like the place that you expected?" he asked.

"Everything is like it. It is lovely, I think, far lovelier than I ever thought; only Miss Neale. I hadn't expected her here."

"You did not think there would be nobody."

"Oh no, I knew there'd be servants, but not anybody like her."

He laughed at that. "Do you dislike her very much?"

"I don't think that she likes me."

"Oh, come now; you have got so much that she hasn't got that you can afford to be magnanimous. She's jealous, poor old thing. Hilda Neale has never had anything in life but the kicks and curses, and it must be pretty rotten."

Doreen stood very still. She said: "How kind you are! I think you are the kindest and most understanding person I have ever met."

"It pays to be understanding."

"I couldn't like Miss Neale, just because I know that she doesn't like me. Yet you could like her."

He said: "Yes, of course I could like her. She

is a dear at heart; it is just her funny little ways. She will get over this feeling for you and become very fond of you, you will find."

"I don't think so. She makes me frightened. Just like a snake makes you frightened."

"Oh, come now, you laughed at me over my magpie! Let me laugh at you over your snake. That isn't very fair. Hilda Neale isn't like that really."

"I wonder."

He caught her hand and set it in his arm. "Now, you listen to me. You are very young and life is very new. Wait a bit and you'll find life changes, just as you'll change your tune about a lot of the things in life. You don't think I'm right now, but you'll find that I am later on."

"All right," she promised.

He gave her a posy of flowers for her room, but it hurt that she had to ask Miss Neale for a jug for them. It hurt that she was not allowed to arrange them as she wanted, but that they were taken away and brought back, beautifully done, too beautifully done, and not the way that she had wanted them.

Miss Neale was waiting for them at dinner.

It was set for three in the dining-room, exquisitely served, for which, of course, Miss Neale was responsible. It all made Doreen feel rather little girl and helpless. She did not know what to do next. She was afraid.

She thought: "I'll never like Miss Neale. There is something about her that I can't understand, and I don't know that I want to."

Afterwards they had coffee on the loggia, and

the moon came up between the cedars, and the light mist lifted itself from the surface of the lake, whilst there was the sound of the owls calling in the trees, one to another.

"Happy, Doreen?" he asked.

She said: "I'm so terribly happy that I don't know what I shall do about it. It can't last. Have you ever had that kind of feeling? Have you ever thought that it was too beautiful to continue?"

"Have I not?" he said.

Miss Neale looked up. She said: "Sometimes it is a forewarning, isn't it?"—quietly, insignificantly, as though it were of no importance. But both of them felt it.

CHAPTER VI

Shower down thy love, O burning bright! For one
night, or the other night
Will come the Gardener in white, and gathered
flowers are dead, Yasmin.

JAMES ELROY FLECKER.

DOREEN never quite knew when it was that she fell in love with Charles. It may have been that first moment when she saw him coming through the convent garden with the Mother leaning on her old stick; it may have been later, when they had tea in the inn, or when they made the journey together. In Paris. In the rose-garden at Clifton. By the lake that evening when they went to see the swans' nest on the island.

She never knew.

Perhaps it was not love in the accepted terms. Perhaps it was a keen fondness, something akin to love, though not quite the same thing. She was not sure.

She cared for him.

He might be older than she was, he might be old enough to be her father, but she did not care about a thing like that. Why should age matter so much? People made too great a fuss about it.

It might be that, the prison having opened, it was only natural that she should suddenly fall in love with the man who had opened those doors for her? Again she did not know.

She cared for him absolutely.

I wonder if he will ever find out, she asked herself.

He was asking himself the same question.

There was one fundamental difference in the emotion each had for the other. Charles was in love with Doreen, she cared for him. He realised how extraordinary it was that he should have travelled so far in life and should not have fallen in love before. He had never felt like this for any girl. Once he had supposed that he would fall in love with a broken dragon fly as she had lain in his arms, her bronze wings drooping to the floor, but he had been mistaken. He had never felt anything but sympathy and understanding and common friendship for Doreen's mother.

For the girl he felt something infinitely sweeter.

It is all nonsense, he told himself, something that I have got to hide, something which cannot be.

Guardians must not fall in love with the girls they guard. Perhaps he was older than he felt, for a man is never old to himself. He had not realised that the years had rolled on so steadily, and that, now past the middle fifties, he was, in the eyes of the world, past his prime. He was an old man and in his house was a very young, impressionable girl; he must be careful that she never guessed the fact that he cared deeply for her.

Charles loved life. He loved everything appertaining to life, and he believed that the young should always be given their chance. Not for the world would he have influenced Doreen.

So he asked young men in to play tennis with

her. When the autumn came and there were dances, he chaperoned her out to those dances and sat back among the chaperons, content to watch her and not to trespass himself upon a moment of her time.

She would come to him in distress.

"I want to dance with *you*, Charles."

"Nonsense, run away and play."

"Don't you see, I *like* dancing with you?"

Because he was so charming he took it as flattery. The girl felt it her duty; it was not that she really cared, it was that she wanted to pay him a delicate compliment. Very charming of her, but it ended there.

Once, and once only, he had a passage-of-arms with Hilda Neale about it. It was very late, and he had returned from a dance to find Miss Neale sitting waiting up for him with a whisky toddy. She was sitting in the library, her knitting sagged into her lap, and about her there was something a little sinister. He dismissed Doreen to bed; the girl was tired out anyway, and, seeing that Hilda Neale wanted to talk, he sat down amusedly before her.

"Well," he said, "and what is it?"

At first she would not say. She fell back upon the woman's usual excuse of it being nothing. She stared at him malevolently. In the end he said that he knew that it was something and challenged her to tell him.

"If I do, you won't hold it against me?"

"Of course not."

"I hate to see you making such a fool of yourself over that girl!"

He was amazed at the venom with which she spoke; he had not thought her capable of it, and turned sharply. "I making a fool of myself! What do you mean?"

"Surely you realise what everybody must be saying? A man cannot introduce a young and very beautiful girl into his house without causing comment. Even you must know that. The whole neighbourhood has talked its head off."

"Let them talk. What does that matter?"

"It does matter. You, who were so beyond reproach; you, against whom nothing and nobody could speak or be spoken of. Don't you see how silly it is?"

"I see that it is my own life, and that I can do what I like with it."

"Too many of us have spoilt our own lives along those very lines," she snapped back.

He went over to the fireplace and stood there under the great picture of himself painted by the academician that year when he had taken silk. He had looked at it only yesterday and had thought how well he bore his years; he was not flattering himself, he was looking with the discerning judgment of a man who wants to know the truth. He wore well. He wanted to wear well, if only to enjoy this first bright springtime of Doreen's with her. After, of course, she would marry somebody and go right away; her springtime was his St. Martin's Summer. He did not feel bitter about it, nor hard.

"Look here," he said, "I brought you here because I thought it dreadful for you to be wanting a job, and here was a ready-made one where

you could spend the rest of your days in peace and happiness. There would be no menace of dismissal hanging over your head. You and I both know that you will stay here for ever. Or rather we did know it until a moment ago."

"You said that you would not hold it against me."

"It will be impossible for you to stay in this house with Doreen if you continue to feel so venomously and so bitterly. It has got to stop."

"I have a right to my own opinion."

"You have no right to judge my life by what a handful of small-minded people think, and you know it. I don't intend to tolerate it, and I give you to understand that quite plainly."

"Then you mean I have got to go."

"I mean nothing of the kind. What I want you to understand is that you have got to allow me to live my own life; you are not to bring bitterness and hatred into my house. Doreen is very young, she needs guardianship and care, she needs somebody to see after her. In a year or two she will marry and then life will settle down to its old normal rut again."

"And everybody will have said what they have to say," she retorted.

"I tell you I don't care what they say. I don't care what they think. I tell you quite emphatically that I am not going to be dictated to."

"Very well."

She got up, smoothing down her thick black silk frock. She wore extraordinarily plain clothes, reminiscent of the latter part of the last century.

The gold locket at her throat, the little crochet cuffs at her wrists.

She said: "I will leave this day month."

He stood there looking at her. It struck him that perhaps he had misjudged her, and that Hilda Neale had grown fond of him. He was one of the few people who had been kind to her in a world which she had been born to find inconceivably hard; the result had been that she had formed an attachment for him.

He said: "Don't you think that you are being rather silly? You know there is no need for any of this. I have a perfect right to live my own life my own way, without being responsible for it to you. To go, because you think I am angry with you, would be absurd. Where would you go? Your place is here at Clifton, and this is where you must stay."

For a moment she stood there defiantly, as though there were much more that she wanted to say, then suddenly her nerve gave.. He saw her face pucker, and knew that she would be in tears.

Quietly he took her arm and led her to the door. "I should go to bed, if I were you. We will forget all this. It doesn't matter, it is of no importance, and as far as I am concerned it has never taken place."

Then, quite gently, he pushed her through into the hall. She stood there for a moment, choking down her tears, then she moved slowly across it towards the stairs, which climbed up, beside the panelled wall, with the moonlight coming in from the oriel window.

She walked like a ghost, erect, with dignity,

and as she got to the top stair she paused for a moment to look down into the hall below, with its great bowl of mixed flowers on the centre table and the big carved chairs.

"I hate her," she said to herself, and there was such venom in her voice that had she spoken aloud, it would have penetrated the entire house. "I hate her for coming here and taking him from me. I hate her. I always shall."

CHAPTER VII

How does the meadow-flower its bloom unfold?
Because the lovely little flower is free
Down to its root, and in that freedom bold.

WORDSWORTH.

Just before Christmas Doreen wrote home to the convent. The letter told how happy she was here in her new-found life, what a lovely winter it had been, going to parties, seeing theatres, up and down to London, riding. Charles had taken her about with him and she thought that she was the happiest girl in the land.

The letter seemed to write itself, and she went on and on. Then for a moment she paused. There were one or two things which disturbed her, and she had been more conscious of them lately. She knew nobody to whom she could tell of them, and she felt the urgent need for advice.

She was anxious about Hilda Neale. In the beginning she had tried to make friends with Miss Neale, and sometimes they had gone for walks together, and she had always tried to persuade the housekeeper to talk. But between them there seemed to be a thick wall of reserve, something that Doreen could not hope to penetrate. At first she was annoyed by it, then she thought that perhaps Miss Neale was shy, and when the shyness wore off the reserve would go with it. But it was not shyness, and the reserve did not go. It stayed.

Watching her closely, Doreen became anxious.

She felt that here, in this very house, there was an enemy. Then, thinking it over, she decided that Hilda Neale was dreadfully disappointed. Whereas Charles thought that she had only learnt to care for him because he had shown her kindness, when all the rest of the world had been hard to her, Doreen was not so easily convinced.

She might be very young, she might be only a child, but she was convinced that Hilda Neale was in love with Charles. She was sure that her own arrival at Clifton Hall had cut short a romance that Miss Neale was trying to foster, and which she now knew could only prove itself null and void.

Because in one way she felt so sorry, Doreen tried to persuade Miss Neale to talk to her. She went out of her way to be nice to her. But the wall remained; it was a fortress which could not be destroyed and stood fast between them. Nothing would tear it down.

The other matter which worried Doreen, and on which she would have liked some advice, was such a foolish little one that she hardly knew if she ought to count it. It had started that day in the train, when Charles had seen the magpie and had told her that "one meant sorrow".

Then she had thought that he was being merely absurd when he talked of his superstitions, and that he exaggerated it; it was something that he could get over. But living here, at Clifton, she had come to realise that this was a strange streak in his life. The superstition was stronger than he was. That nurse who had brought him up had laid the seeds in his life, and now it was

something that he could not uproot. He was quite agitated if a robin appeared on the window-sill on a wintry morning, asking for crumbs. He would not walk under a ladder, and nothing would have made him choose a green tie.

Once he had challenged Doreen because she wore a green frock.

"But why shouldn't I wear it?" she had asked.

"It's unlucky."

"Oh, nonsense! How could a colour be unlucky?"

"If you wear green, you'll wear black. It is a sign of death," he said, and he said it simply, like a child who believes in what it has been told.

"Charles," said Doreen, "you ought to know better than that. We once talked about green being unlucky at the convent, and the Mother said that we moderns considered it unlucky because it had been handed down from generation to generation. Green was the colour of the forest wherein, in the old days, there were wild beasts. Definitely it was unlucky to go into the forest; most of the people who went in didn't come out again. They associated green with death for that reason. But now the forests are free of wild beasts; it isn't unlucky any more."

Miss Neale had come into the room whilst she had said it. She had appealed to the house-keeper.

"Don't you think superstition very silly?" she asked.

"No," said Miss Neale quietly, "I don't. I have known that sort of thing come true very often. I believe in it myself."

There was nothing for it but to say "Oh", doubtfully, and then defiantly, with the brave effrontery of youth: "Well, I don't believe a word of it. I think the whole thing is a lot of rubbish."

But after that she started taking notice of Miss Neale, and the more she noticed the more she realised that the housekeeper fostered this superstitious side of Charles' nature. "It's all wrong," thought Doreen.

Miss Neale always told him if there were any queer omen about, she never let it escape his notice. Time after time Doreen had argued with him, because she could not understand how anyone as level-headed as Charles could really believe in so much nonsense, but he did believe in it, and nothing would change him. She wished that she could have had five minutes' talk with the Reverend Mother, because undoubtedly the old nun would have known how to deal with a situation of this kind. But it was not a thing that she could put into a letter, and she finished hurriedly, with no mention of any of the things that really worried her.

Christmas at the convent had been quiet. She had generally been the only girl left there, for the others had gone home, to spend the holidays, and Doreen, having no home to go to, had felt rather bitter as she knelt in the little chapel, and watched the tiny crib with the plaster angels, and the light burning above it, and sang the Christmas hymns.

This was to be her first Christmas in a different setting.

Early in the week the gardeners brought in boughs of laurel, and holly, and mistletoe. A young fir-tree was set in the drawing-room, and crowned with stars, and hung with tinsel. It made a brave show.

"Christmas at Clifton is traditional," said Charles, and he smiled encouragingly at her; "we always give a dance on Boxing Night. This year it will be for you."

"I think I am glad that all those other Christmases were so dull, because this is going to be so wonderful," she said.

It was going to be the happiest time of her whole life.

On Christmas morning Charles' gift to her came on the tray with her early tea. It was a brooch which could be converted into a couple of diamond clips. She had wanted one for a long time, and she stared at it excitedly. They went to church together; a frosty morning, with the fir trees outlined in crystal, and the lake held fast in ice. There might be skating if it held, but Charles said that it had only held three times at this time of year in his life; he did not think that it would hold now. Christmas was nearly always "green" in England.

They ate a lunch of roast beef and mince 'pies, and then for the rest of the day little carol parties arrived from the village to sing to them. There was something fascinating about it. They had tea together in the library and Hilda Neale joined them. Afterwards she went away again, and they did not turn on the lights. There was a great log burning, and the room was illuminated by it.

"It's nice this way," said Doreen.

"Enjoying your first Christmas here?"

"Tremendously! Oh, Charles, how lucky you have been to have this place as home. To have lived here, to have grown up here, to have had so many Christmases here."

"Yes," he said solemnly, "I have never ceased to be grateful for Clifton. It is a very beautiful place."

"What will happen to it?" she asked.

"How do you mean, happen to it?"

"You ought to have a wife and sons to carry on. It is frightful to think that there is nobody."

"There is a remote cousin or so. But I expect when I go the estate will go too. The day is passing for this type of life. Too heavy taxation and all that kind of thing! I have never tried to save; there seemed to be nothing to save for seeing that there was nobody following after me."

"But there should be somebody following after you, Charles."

"It's too late now."

"Too late; why, you're still young!"

"Anyway, my hair's grey."

"You old silly! As though grey hair meant anybody was old. They told me at the convent of one nun who was only twenty-three and her hair was quite grey."

"I expect she had had bad food."

"I don't think so. They fed the nuns very well. But it does seem a shame, Charles." She glanced round the room, at the carving, and the pictures of the ancestors and the stuffed heads of

animals they had shot. All this would pass, and go away, and be lost.

He said: "You're a queer little kid, aren't you? I believe you are quite fond of Clifton."

"Of course I am. It's my home."

The firelight leapt up and he saw her little eager face. In that moment he could not resist it. "Oh, Doreen," he said quickly, "how I wish you had grown up before, how I wish I were not so old."

"You aren't old! I keep telling you, you aren't old."

"There is such an enormous gap between us."

She sat staring at him, then she twisted a minute handkerchief in her lap, and he knew instinctively that her eyes were full of tears.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm so fond of you, so grateful to you," she whispered in a little low voice, and her head dropped forward on to her chest.

"Doreen, dear little Doreen, I want you to be fond of me. I'm terribly fond of you." And then, because now the whole emotion was too big for him: "That's what I am trying to say. Can't you see that is what I am saying all the time. Doreen, my sweet, if only I were not so old . . . if only it were possible for us . . ."

"You know that I love you?" she said simply.

Funny that she had never thought that she would be able to say that. Funny that she had not believed that she would ever tell him how much she cared, and now here she was with the words coming and no feeling of shame or modesty.

She loved him too well.

"You love me because you are grateful to me?"

"No, I don't. I love you because you are the most wonderful person that I have ever met, and because you are more than my guardian."

He shook his head.

"It would be a shame to take advantage of you, my sweet; it is just that you have met so few people. Nothing more."

She knelt down beside his chair and put her arms on his. "Charles dear, do listen to me. Please listen to me and bear with me. I know my own mind, and this isn't because I have met so few people, it is because you yourself are such a lovely person, nobody could ever be dearer. I suppose you think this is awful of me, but it is something I have wanted to tell you for so long! Ages. Now I'm telling you."

"I've wanted to tell you how much I love you, too, only I didn't dare. It did not seem fair on you."

"Trying to be fair we've been horribly unfair on one another."

He leaned forward and kissed her. He had kissed her forehead often, briefly, as though he disliked it, because he had told himself that he must not linger. Now he could linger, and he could touch her mouth.

Outside on the sharp frosty gravel they could hear the steady sludge of small feet from the village and the piping start of a carol.

God rest ye merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing ye dismay,
Remember Christ your Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day.

Still he kissed her. When he released her the voices seemed to be dim accompaniment, and no more. The light of the log had died down a little, and both of them were now conscious that they had gone ahead a long way into the future, and that future was something beautiful beyond dreams.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, and her voice trembled because she was afraid.

"Supposing we did get married?"

"Charles, I can't believe it."

"Darling, are you quite sure that you won't get sick of an old, old man? I'm fifty-eight. In ten years' time I shall be sixty-eight, crotchety, irritable, snappy, and you'll be a very young woman still. Are you quite sure that it wouldn't be a most dreadful mistake?"

"Quite, quite sure," she said. "It would be a far more dreadful mistake if I didn't marry you. You see, there isn't any age in love, is there? It doesn't count. It doesn't matter."

"You're an angel."

There was a tap at the door, and they sprang apart. One of the younger housemaids came in shyly, carrying a basket in her hand.

She said: "If you please, miss, one of the gardeners sent this up for you. He said it was a Christmas present, and would I please be very careful."

Doreen took it and brought the basket to the fire. The library door closed again, and she began to unwrap the parcel.

"What can it be, Charles? I expect it is that fair-haired gardener, the one who always sends

such lovely flowers up for my room."

"What has he sent you now?"

She pulled aside the tissue paper, and a small furry face looked out. Instantly a rather frightened little black kitten crawled out of the paper and gave a feeble mew. It was coal black.

"Oh, the darling!" she exclaimed.

But on Charles' face there was a look of infinite relief.

He said: "Doreen, don't you see? It is luck. It is a lucky black cat. It has come at exactly the right moment, and it means that it isn't crazy at all."

"What isn't crazy?"

"Our marriage."

"It never was crazy. It always was the one thing that I wanted more than anything else."

"We're going to be so happy."

"Of course we are going to be happy."

That was when Hilda Neale came into the room.

CHAPTER VIII

And on her lover's arm she leant,
And round her waist she felt it fold,
And far across the hills they went
In that new world which is the old.

TENNYSON.

THEY told no one until the next night.

They sat up late talking, and when she went to her room Doreen had Charles' signet ring upon her finger. But tomorrow she would not wear it, she told herself, because it would be the first thing that Hilda Neale would notice, and somehow, for no reason at all, she felt guilty about Hilda Neale.

For this particular moment she would not allow anything to agitate or worry her, because this present hour was perhaps one of the sweetest in her life; she would not allow it to be spoilt with a single doubt.

The next morning the frost still held, and there was further prospect of skating. The swans came up to the house to be fed, looking big and awkward as they walked in bandy fashion up the lawn. There were a crowd of small birds on the feeding-table, and the robin was on the sill of the breakfast-room. Doreen deliberately frightened him away before Charles saw him. She did not want anything to spoil this particular day, and she knew quite well that he would have hated to think that the robin had been there.

"Why are you sending it away?" asked Miss

Neale, who had come in very quietly and saw what was going on.

"You know that it worries Charles."

Grimly Miss Neale walked to the table and sat down by the coffee-pot. She said: "Even if you dismiss the bird you cannot dismiss the bad luck that he brings so easily."

"But surely you know that is nonsense. Robins are dear little birds, they don't bring bad luck at all."

"Oh," said Hilda Neale, and she said it in that particular manner which suggested that she had private knowledge on the subject.

Doreen sat down at the table. She wished that she could break down this fortress now. It seemed all wrong that Hilda Neale should lose her job here just because she was so unapproachable and for no reason.

"The dance tonight will be a success," she suggested.

"All Clifton dances are successful," said Miss Neale; "they are known throughout the county."

Then she began to pour out the coffee.

"I'll never get past this fortress," Doreen thought suddenly, "I'll never break it down." There was something so overwhelmingly strong about Hilda Neale, little and slight though she might be. Something which was invulnerable.

Charles came in. He hadn't seen the robin, but Miss Neale had to tell him of it. "That robin's been here again."

Before he could say anything Doreen interposed with: "But the lucky black kitten is getting on grandly."

The day dragged.

There seemed to be nowhere in the whole house where she could find room to sit down and rest. All the reception rooms were being stripped for the dancing; the dining-room was being prepared for supper. Upstairs one wing had been set aside as cloak-rooms, and a woman from the village had appeared with a book of tickets. The whole of Clifton had taken on a strange new appearance, and Doreen was not sure that she liked it like this. She wished that it were back as it had been, and she wandered out into the grounds, still held fast in frost. Charles saw her there feeding the birds, and, seeing her, he came through the frosty grass to her. He wore no hat and his hair shone like frost itself. "He thinks he is old," she thought, "but that isn't true. He is young, he is splendid. I'm going to be so happy with him."

"Tonight," he said, "we'll tell the world. I have an idea that they won't be very surprised."

"I don't care about the world; all I care about is you," she said, and it was quite true.

"Where shall we go for a honeymoon?"

"I'd like to visit the convent for a day or so," she said. "I'd like to talk to the Reverend Mother there."

"Nothing to confess?"

"Nothing," she said. It was curious that she should still want guidance about his superstitious nature. Silly that robins and black kittens should frighten her so much. Almost as though they were ominously connected with her future,

something that she could not uproot. But the Mother would tell her the way.

He said: "Darling, we'll be married this early spring and escape the mists and fogs here. We'll go out to the South of France. The spring comes early there. We can go on to Switzerland when the white crocuses come."

"Under the snow," she said, "peeping up, masses of them, and inside each one there seems to be a sunset, as though it had just dropped there by mistake."

"Dear kid!" he said.

"I don't want you to go on thinking of me as a kid. I want to be grown up."

"You will be grown up when you are married to me."

"And it'll be soon?"

"If you are quite sure about it, Doreen?"

"I am sure, quite sure, nothing could ever make me change my mind. I think I knew about this the moment that I saw you coming into the herb garden at the convent with the Mother."

"We have got to realise that it is for life," he said; "I am not so old that I am likely to die within the next handful of years. It is quite true that I did have heart trouble, a mild form of angina, but angina doesn't kill."

"It's a sort of spasm, isn't it?"

"Yes, very painful. I have not had so much of it lately, since I went to a new doctor and he gave me some special tablets to take. They ease it almost at once."

"It really isn't dangerous?"

"No. Oh, I dare say you have heard of people dying of it, but my doctor assures me that isn't so. Whilst people are waiting to die of angina old age overtakes them." He shook her arm. "Come, don't let's talk of anything so morbid. The point that I was coming to is this. What will happen if somebody younger and more attractive suddenly glitters into your life?"

"I don't think I am one of the people who find the young and attractive very fascinating."

"Silly little goose! How can you know yourself very well, tucked away in that convent, with never half an eye to the world. I'm about the only man you've met."

"Oh no, this autumn I've met all kinds of people; you've taken me about, haven't you?"

"I've done my best. But the future is always unsure. It is the unread book, and anything may be on its pages. Doreen, quite seriously, what shall we do if we have been too hasty, and you have made a mistake?"

"I . . . I haven't made a mistake," she protested stubbornly.

"If that does happen, I'll stand back. I'll remember today, and I'll stand back. It'll be the only decent thing that I can do."

"It would hurt you too much! If I have made a mistake, I hope I'll have the good sense to keep quiet about it," she said, and held up her face to be kissed.

Then they walked back into the house together.

She was dressing for the dance. The new white chiffon dress that she had ordered a fortnight ago, with the string-wide shoulder straps and the diamanté round the neck. A deb's frock, the girl in the shop had said, and had suggested that she wore it with a string of pale blue turquoise matrix. There was a hint of pale blue at the waist, there were little pale blue slippers to wear with it.

Hilda Neale had glanced at it as it lay in its wrapping of tissue paper.

"You like it?" Doreen had enquired feverishly, because she was enthusiastic about the dress and she wanted everybody to like it.

"I always think white and that shade of pale blue is a little insipid."

"I think that it looks lovely." But she knew that Hilda Neale had now set an idea in her head, an idea that she did not want put there.

She stood at the top of the stairs in her new frock. It was idiotic that the question in her heart was, Is this insipid? Is it stupid? Is it too little girl? And at this particular moment in her life she so particularly wanted to look grown up and dignified.

She saw Hilda Neale standing at the bottom. She wore a frock of violet moiré which rustled as she walked. There were violets tucked into the waist, a slick, shapely waist, in spite of the passing of the years, for Hilda was the spare type. Then, behind her, Doreen saw Charles, just come out of the library and looking up to the head of the stairs, where the girl stood in her white chiffon frock with the pale blue.

"A charming picture," he said, and instantly

Hilda Neale turned and, saying nothing, moved away. But Doreen had seen her face, and knew that she resented the girl being here, knew that she was wretchedly unhappy.

The guests started arriving. They could hear the sharp sound of cars in the frosty drive, of the door opening and shutting, of coming and going. Soon there was the sound of music in the house, and of voices, eagerness and chatter. It was Christmas as Doreen had always visualised it when she was at the convent with the view of the *Jungfrau* between the mountains. It was Christmas as she had always wanted to live it.

And, she thought, Charles is quite wrong if he imagines that I should ever fall in love with somebody younger and gayer. Quite wrong. After all, I'd be a fool to throw all this away, putting it at its lowest, and anyway I do love him so.

At supper-time Charles made the announcement.

She went across to his side at the top table. She stood there tremulously lovely, but looking very young. Hilda Neale watched her from the far corner.

Hilda Neale knew what was coming. She had known for a long time. She, herself caring for Charles as she did, was not blind to signs which Doreen would never notice. This morning she had watched them when they were feeding the birds together; she had seen Charles taking Doreen's arm with that air of proprietorship; later she had seen him stoop and kiss her.

It won't be a success, she had said to herself

as she turned from the window; it can't be a success. She is so young there is bound to be somebody else in her life; she knows nothing of the world. He must be crazy to think of such a marriage.

Out here in the hall she could hear the little speech and the noise of the guests cheering, and she wanted to shut out the sound. She could not bear it. Nobody must see her now in this urgent moment of anxiety, because she was desperately worried for his future, more anxious even for his than for her own. She opened the side door and stepped out on to the loggia. It was a magnificent night with a frosty world lit by a cold silver moon, and every twig silhouetted against the starshine.

She did not feel the intense cold for a moment because within her there was a fever burning, a fever of despair. She stood there in her moiré frock with the low-cut bodice and the short sleeves. She stood quite still, staring at the whiteness and the silver, and knowing that ahead of her lay a journey away from all this for ever. Worse still, away from Charles, and she could not imagine what life would be like without him.

She did not know how long it was that she stood staring, but slowly she became conscious of the fact that her limbs had gone numb, and that now she was stone cold, and could hardly crawl back to the door to let herself inside the house again.

The guests were dancing. She could hear the gaiety of the music, which had turned "Good King Wenceslas" into something of a jig. She

went past the room where they were into the dining-room and got herself a strong whisky. She must have been crazy to go out there into the cold, she might easily have caught her death. As though that would help her.

Yet it might, she said to herself gloomily as she gulped down the double whisky.

CHAPTER IX

I must have liberty
Withal, as large a charter as the wind,
To blow on whom I please.

SHAKESPEARE.

It was almost dawn when the last car drove away from Clifton and when Doreen went up to bed, tired but radiantly happy. She slept well into the next day, coming down to tea, and wondering to find the hours so topsy-turvy. Charles met her, and she was surprised to find that they were to have tea alone in the library together. She thought perhaps this was the beginning of a new era, and that Hilda Neale had realised that her reign was over, and that now they would want to be alone. But Charles instantly told her what had happened.

"She is in bed with a temperature," he said. "I don't know what happened, but she did not feel too well last night. Probably she overworked at the party. She is one of those people who spare themselves nothing at all, you know."

"Is she really ill?"

He made a little grimace. "She is not the sort who sham."

Doreen said: "She has been worrying me rather a lot. You see, I've always known that she didn't like me. She never has done. I know also that she never will like me, because she doesn't want to, and yet I hate the idea that when

we get married she will have to go. It seems so unfair on her. She must have thought that she was here for life."

"She *was* here for life, if only she had behaved herself," he replied.

"She has behaved herself."

"Yes, on the surface; but underneath it all she has been very jealous of you. I even got the conceited idea that she had a passion for me."

"She had," said Doreen, helping herself to hot scones, "she very definitely has."

"Oh, she must have got over that now. She knows that we are going to be married and that she will have to find a job elsewhere."

"I hate being hard on her."

Charles patted her hand. "With things as they are it is only too obvious that there won't be room for the two of you in the same house," he said.

And they dismissed the subject to talk of their own plans. Marriage. A honeymoon in the country where spring first comes; the visit to the convent.

It so happened that they could not push the affair aside as easily as they had supposed. The doctor came to see Hilda Neale and was not satisfied. The temperature was still rising, and she seemed to be having some slight delirium. He sent in a nurse for the night. At breakfast next morning the nurse horrified both Charles and Doreen by announcing that it was pneumonia and only the greatest possible care could get the patient through it.

Instantly both of them felt that they had

maligned Hilda Neale, with that curious swerving of human emotions. Nurses arrived and were quartered with her in her room; a specialist from London came down, and expressed the opinion that matters were very bad. For a week it seemed that she could not possibly recover: then slowly she turned the corner.

It was the doctor who, having no idea that her dismissal had been discussed, explained to Charles that undoubtedly she would have to go very easily for a time. She would be seriously weakened by this sharp attack, and he urged Charles to take care of her.

It was a very awkward situation.

"So now what?" he asked Doreen as they walked across the lawn in the January sunshine. One of those mild days when the human mind turns to snowdrops and aconites and all the lovely garlands of spring to follow.

"We can't possibly send her away when she is ill."

"And yet how can we keep her?"

"We can't send her away! She isn't fit to earn her living with strangers who may work her too hard. She has got to stay here. Charles, you must promise me that she stays."

A month ago she would not have believed that she could be taking Hilda Neale's part so vehemently. Now there was nothing that she could say strongly enough to persuade him to keep her.

"I realise that it is extremely awkward."

"It's more than that. It would be cruel to send her off. We can't do it."

He said slowly: "No, I suppose we can't." And then: "But, Doreen, silly as it may seem, it is all against my better judgment to keep her here."

"Not when she is ill."

"I can't forget that she is jealous."

"I think she'll get over that. I think she must realise that, when we are married, all that part of her life is over. We can't both marry you."

"I don't think she ever thought of that."

"I expect she did," said Doreen, making a face; and then, very lovingly: "Surely when we behave so kindly to her she will repay it by being different, and get over any silly petty jealousies she may ever have had."

"Well, we hope so," he said.

When Hilda Neale got up again they were shocked by the change in her appearance. Her hair, which had been merely speckled and streaked with grey, had now gone quite white. Incidentally it made her look much younger and framed her face with something akin to beauty. It gave her a kinder look. She seemed to have shrunk to nothing, and it was obvious that she had very little strength by the way that she moved.

But when Doreen came to talk to her she found herself up against that fortress again, the fortress which refused to be besieged.

She said: "Miss Neale, you mustn't worry about the future, you must not let anything stand in the way of your getting well. You'll be staying here, you know."

"Thank you," was the reply. No more. No reality behind the words, nothing to convey that it was very genuine thanks that she felt.

Disappointedly Doreen looked at her. "I hoped that would make you happy," she said, and it was a helpless feeler, meeting with no response.

"I shall be strong soon," said Hilda Neale. "Strong enough to make the arrangements for the wedding reception here."

"No," said Doreen quickly, "please not. We are going to be married in London from an hotel. There won't be any need for you to work your fingers to the bone on our behalf, so don't think about it."

"A London hotel?"

"Yes, Charles and I decided that. We thought that it would simplify everything."

"But all the Fayres have been married here."

"These Fayres are not going to be married here." And Doreen smiled. "Come, it will make it much easier for you, and you can have a nice long convalescence whilst we are away, and be really strong and fit for when we come back."

She hoped that she sounded to be encouraging. Miss Neale said nothing. Now she came down for a few hours in the afternoon, but her step had lost its elasticity; she moved more slowly, but never less erect. There seemed to be more of the ghost woman about her than the real thing, and in some subtle way Doreen felt even more afraid of her.

She thought to herself: Did I do wrong to

want her to stay?—and then hastily corrected herself. It had been the kind thing, it had been the right thing to do, and she had made no mistake. Surely Hilda Neale must realise that she had been very good about it.

Yet still the panic stayed. She tried to remember the comforting advice of the Mother at the convent, who had always said: "If you do right, then the world cannot be wrong." But it looked as though the Mother had been misled, and, although Doreen had done right, the world was still wrong. It was a horrid thought.

But now there was little time for any thoughts, because she was for ever journeying to and fro to London arranging trousseaux. Charles was very good to her. They went to see jewels which had been left for years in the bank and were now brought out to be reset.

The choosing of clothes became a trifle monotonous. At first it had been exciting, but now Doreen had arrived at that stage when she was sick of it and wished that the wedding were over and that they could start on the most thrilling journey of their lives.

"I want to get away," she said to Charles.

"I know. There is too much preparation. I'm glad we are not having one of those enormous weddings, with choirs, and guests, and eatings and drinkings. We were wise to cut that out."

"I think Miss Neale wanted one."

"I can't help her troubles. The moment we have gone she is going down to Bournemouth for a fortnight to recover, then the decorators are coming in and I'm having this place altered a bit

so that when we get back it won't be quite so old-fashioned. It's needed a change for years."

"Ought we to spend all that?"

"Yes, of course. Now don't you start being mean."

"Mean? I don't want to be mean. Oh. Charles, do let's let everything go and fly off together. I have the feeling that if we don't grab at happiness now it may elude us."

"Silly little girl!" He passed a hand over her hair, and smiled. She had the feeling then that he was so much older and so much wiser than she was. It was beautiful to marry somebody whom she could lean upon, and to whom she could look up, as she would always look up to Charles.

So on an early February morning they were married in a grey London church. Until she stepped inside that church she had not realised that Charles would have it turned into a bower of white lilac and lilies. It smelt like a spring morning. She saw an altar which sparkled with candle-flame like the altar of the convent on festival mornings, and she saw the freesias palely lovely beside lilies-of-the-valley and white roses. It was as though she had stepped out of a blank London fog into a garden, sweet with the promise of eternal spring.

Perhaps as she had driven here she had for a moment wondered whether this was the right step that she was taking, whether this was the right thing to do. But now, as she came into the church, she knew that she loved Charles, and that nothing could change that ~~love~~.

He had spoken of a young man who might come into her life later on. There would be no young man! She was quite sure of this as she walked slowly up the aisle to meet him. She was not afraid.

So, in the dim blue haze of that afternoon the two of them stood side by side on the channel boat, passing across a sea that was calm like milk, with a light fog blown across it, so that they moved slowly. They came to Calais, which they had left only six months before, yet now it was not just Calais, but Heaven.

Hand in hand they entered the train to bear them to the south. Already it seemed to be sweet with the scent of mimosa.

"Oh, Charles, I am so happy," she whispered, and curled up closer to him.

"Pray Heaven that you never regret this," he said, then, hoping that she would not see, he took one of the little tablets out of his pocket and swallowed it. Instantly she was alert.

"Charles! Your heart is bad?"

"It is the excitement. I'm not supposed to have excitement like this. It's nothing. No, it doesn't hurt too badly. It won't be a moment."

She stared at him aghast; a faint blue line trembled about his lips for a moment. His eyes closed, then they opened with a smile for her.

"This stuff is quite magical."

"Oh, Charles, I've never seen you in an attack before. It's very worrying."

"Not at all. You have never seen one because I've almost given up having them! This was entirely my own fault. Look." He indicated

the little station. A black cat was washing its lean limbs in the doorway of the station-master's office.

"Look," he said. "That's good luck."

But she was looking at the lips which had recently gone so blue. She felt somehow that it was not a happy omen.

CHAPTER X

God's in His heaven :
All's right with the world.

BROWNING.

THEY stayed awhile basking in the joy of early spring on the Riviera. The mimosa was in flower, and the tuberoses, and there were stocks standing high in the gardens and filling the air with their clove scent.

There was always music, the soft stringed music, which is, so Charles told her, the most exquisite accompaniment to love. They sat in the gardens and on the terraces; there seemed to be no need to hurry, for time stood still. It had become matterless.

They drove to Grasse one day; they visited a little convent for the sick, and the shrine where a Madonna grants wishes.

It was not so much a journey as a romance. To Doreen it was like a dream. Something she had visualised in the convent, but had never supposed could come true. She was tremendously happy.

"Once," she said, "one of the girls in the convent told me that it didn't do to be too happy. It meant that you were on the threshold of sorrow. Do you think that is true?" And, instantly she knew that she had made a mistake and had aroused his superstitious fancy by the way that

he turned and looked at her, nervously, as though he were afraid to think of such a thing.

They were standing in the garden which surrounded the tiny chapel of ease, where the blue Madonna granted wishes.

"I hope it isn't true, else we are both standing on the threshold of much sorrow," he said.

"Come," she urged, "let us go inside and ask the Madonna to make it happiness, not sorrow. She grants wishes and she will surely listen to us."

She hoped in that way to divert him.

It was a most romantic honeymoon. They stayed here by the sea, which is always blue for a month. The sun became fiercely warm during the day, and there were the flowers and the sound of music, and the aura of unreality which was just what they wanted.

They went into Italy and toured for a while, going to see all manner of little cities, with cobbled streets and piazzas. They went to Florence, and to Venice, and sat in the square, drinking coffee and listening to the tinkle of stringed music from Florians.

They came ultimately to Switzerland, much later than they had originally intended. The snows had been swept away by the sun, gaining strength every hour. The crocuses had died, and in their place the gentians turned the hills deep serene blue, and there were narcissi here and there. The scent of them was exquisite.

As they approached the village, Doreen became tremendously excited. She had not believed that she could want to return so much. It is queer,

she thought; as a girl I looked upon it as a prison, and now all I want is to return to it. It is all very extraordinary and shows that the Mother was right, and she knew that I should want to come back to it.

The car took the mountain road, and came into the village and climbed the hill towards the convent. Just as before, not a tree changed. The garden with its flowers, the herb garden, and the figure of a novice working there in her white habit. It would be Bertha.

The car came to a standstill at the big door, and Charles rang the bell.

"Who will come in reply?" demanded Doreen, tremendously excited. "I wonder who it will be?"

The girl who came was Bertha in a black habit. Time had passed and she had taken her vows. Somehow Doreen had not realised that time was moving so quickly. She had never supposed that Bertha would be anything but the girl in her white habit bending in the herb garden.

"Why, Bertha . . . I never thought your time was through," she began.

Bertha smiled. About her now was that strangely remote aura which comes to the avowed nun. She was no longer the schoolgirl who had been here with Doreen in the early part of her stay. She was no longer puddingy, and round, and ready for play, but about her there was that air of sanctity, that strange remote manner which spoke of vows and of another world.

"I'm not Bertha any longer," she said. "I'm Sister Ignatia."

"It seems strange."

"Yes." And again the tolerant smile.

"I'm married. We came here to see the Mother."

Bertha stared at her, then she crossed herself and closed the door, ushering them into the big hall. "You have not heard?"

"Heard? I've heard nothing. One of the girls wrote at Christmas, but I haven't had a line from any of you since then."

"The reverend Mother was very ill."

"You mean she's gone?"

"She is happy now," said Bertha slowly.

Doreen turned to her husband; at that particular moment it seemed that the bottom had fallen out of her world. It was curious that she had thought that the reverend Mother would always be there. Someone to whom she could return for advice, someone, ageless, and for ever.

She said: "Who is here, then, now?"

"It is a stranger. Sister Elizabeth is still with us. Would you care to see Sister Elizabeth?"

Sister Elizabeth was the little fat nun who had been in charge of the sacristy. Doreen had never cared much for her, but at this particular moment she felt that she must ask to see somebody.

"Very well," she said.

They went into the inner hall, with the garden beyond, the view that she had remembered so often, with the *Jungfrau* in the distance, and the fields of gentians in the immediate foreground. She had under-estimated its beauty in thinking of it, she told herself.

A couple of nuns passed through and spoke to her; they were teaching sisters who had been kind to her.

"I am afraid," said Charles, "it is very disappointing to you to find the Mother gone, and it must have been a bit of a shock. She was a very nice woman."

"She was more than that," said Doreen, "and I don't think that I ever appreciated her properly until now."

He said: "Was there something you wanted to see her about?"

"Yes." At this moment she could not pretend. She had wanted to ask the Mother advice about the superstitions which worried Charles so much and to which Miss Neale undoubtedly pandered.

"Couldn't you tell me what it was?"

She shook her head. "No, dear, I'm afraid I couldn't."

He did not ask questions; he was one of those men who was always content to accept the answer if the explanation was not forthcoming. "Perhaps," he said, "Sister Elizabeth can help you."

She went alone into Sister Elizabeth's little room. It was dead plain, as were all the nuns', and against the palely cream-washed wall a wooden cross hung as its only ornament. Sister Elizabeth peered kindly at Doreen from behind her steel-rimmed spectacles. She was one of the most contented of the sisters, with merry twinkling eyes, and little fat hands and feet which moved fast.

"Very nice to see you back here, Doreen," she said, "but sad that you should be met with such

news. Sister Ignatia tells me that you did not know about our reverend Mother."

"No. I am terribly sorry."

"She was talking of you just before she was taken ill. She was very fond of you."

"I was very fond of her," said Doreen, "and I had looked forward to seeing her again. I'm married now, and have been on my honeymoon, returning home by easy stages."

"I hope you will be very happy."

"Thank you."

With the Mother it would have been so much easier, but now the words seemed to stick. They would not come as she had wanted them to.

"The Reverend Mother would have been pleased and happy for you," said Sister Elizabeth, and she still peered at Doreen with those kindly eyes.

"There was something that I had wanted to ask her. Something that worried me," began Doreen.

"Our new Reverend Mother is very kind and understanding . . ." said Sister Elizabeth, but Doreen cut her short.

"No, strangers always worry me. I'd rather ask you. Sister Elizabeth, it is about superstitions. My husband is very superstitious, it is almost a mania with him, and it worries me a great deal."

"Superstitious?" asked Sister Elizabeth. "Lots of people are like that. Even I feel concerned if I spill the salt. Quite concerned."

Doreen went on, unheeding.

"We've got a housekeeper at home and she

panders to this. It isn't right. I have a feeling that it is definitely wrong, but don't know what to do about it." She turned to the Sister in desperation.

"Oh, come," said Sister Elizabeth, "I'm sure it isn't anything significant. Lots of people are superstitious." And she went on smiling blandly.

There was something irritating about that smile. Doreen knew perfectly well that had this been the Reverend Mother it would have been so easy. With Sister Elizabeth it was quite a different matter.

"I wish he were not so superstitious," she said doggedly; "it worries me a great deal. Surely it is wrong for people to believe in pagan things of that sort."

Sister Elizabeth was dealing with a situation that she knew was too deep for her. She was a very simple-minded nun. She had come to the sisterhood as a mere girl, and had never looked beyond it. She could not think deeply. She loved her life here, and she was faithful to her vows. Sin never came near to Sister Elizabeth and she would have been shocked at such an idea.

She said: "My dear, do you think that you ought to condemn your husband? I cannot believe that it is right."

Doreen stared at her dully.

Then she got up. The Reverend Mother had been quite right. In life there is no going back. When she had left the convent last summer it had been for ever. Now she could not even come here for advice, because the wise ears that

would have listened to her, and the kindly mouth which would have given her only kindly understanding words, were closed for ever.

"I'm sorry," she said, and then, quite lightly: "There really isn't anything to worry about, is there?"

"That's better," said little fat Sister Elizabeth, and she felt grateful. She had the happy feeling that she herself had behaved well and had done her job. She felt almost elated, save that she knew that would be wrong, and confined herself to a more modest joy.

Together they went back to where Charles was standing with his back to them, looking out into the garden where he had first seen Doreen.

He turned sharply.

"Hello," he said, and smiled to her.

"We've had a nice talk," said Sister Elizabeth, and smiled and nodded, believing that it really had been a nice talk.

They said goodbye.

They went out to the car together, and now Doreen knew that she would never come back here any more. She was going away for ever.

"Feel happier for talking to the Sister?" Charles asked her as he took her hand and tucked it into his own in the car.

"Much happier," she said, and hoped that it deceived him.

In her heart she felt that she would rather forget this episode. She shut the convent gates upon it.

PART II

CHAPTER XI

And there shall be for thee all soft delight,
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm love in!

KEATS.

Two years had passed by.

It seemed to be longer than that to Doreen sitting in the big drawing-room at Clifton, with the grass running down to the lake beyond the windows, and the roses on the pergola with June once more. She had learnt so much, she had travelled so far since that day when she had stepped out of the convent and had known that the doors swung to for ever and that she would never see any of them again.

She would never see fat little Bertha who had become a nun in a dark habit, and little Sister Elizabeth, and the new Mother who reigned where such a well-loved woman once had been.

She would never want to go back.

She sat here now sewing, and she remembered all the incidents crowded into the two years and she wondered about them, and wondered that she should feel so old when in reality she was still only a girl.

That night on the lake, after they had visited the convent; that night when they had gone to the little hotel at the lakeside, and had stood

there watching the moonlight on the water, and the shadow of the cypresses which themselves looked like nuns who have taken sacred vows, and are already wrapped in blue shadows.

"What was it that worried you, my sweet?" Charles said. "What was it that made you so anxious to see the Mother, and to ask her about?"

Then it had seemed easier to tell him.

"It was about you."

"I guessed that it was about me, but what could it be? Is it that I am unkind to you, because my one idea is to spoil you? It can't be that."

She stood there, her arms about his neck. "No, dear, of course it isn't that. You are goodness itself to me, and I have not a word of complaint on that score. It is about you yourself. Something that has grown up with you and which worries me. It worried me from the moment that you saw that first magpie."

"That first magpie?"

"Yes, coming in the train to Clifton for the first time. You thought that it meant bad luck, just as you hate robins, and crossed knives, and walking under ladders, and green, and all those silly silly things."

"But that's superstition."

She unlocked her arms and started to play with the lapels of his dressing-gown, braided with thick crimson braid in frogs. "Don't you see, Charles, in your particular case it is more than superstition. It is rather frightening—leastways, it rather frightens me."

"I don't see why it should."

"It's so absurd. There is not such a thing as superstition really. Green can't hurt you, crossed knives don't matter, robins are just little birds, and some magpies fly alone. It worries me that it should worry you."

He tried to laugh it off, but all the time she had the feeling that she was touching some unreasonable quality that he strove to hide from her. He was embarrassed that it should agitate her, and in his heart he knew that it was a foolish fault. He said: "Hilda Neale thinks as I do."

"She encourages you. That is the thing that I hate so much. All the time that wretched woman is encouraging you in something that is extremely bad for you."

"But that's nonsense. How can it be bad for me?"

She had the feeling that he was getting annoyed, and adopted a quieter tone.

"One of these days you'll get one of those horrid angina attacks just because you have worried yourself to death over a robin, or a magpie, or something equally unimportant."

"Now, darling, don't be a goose!"

She knew then that he did not intend to change his ways. It was quite plain. And perhaps that was putting it hardly, perhaps it was that he couldn't.

This thing had a hold upon him, and she knew it. She said no more.

They got back to Clifton when the primroses were over and the narcissi were out in the grass along the edge of the pine walk. Summer was walking hot upon the heels of spring, and Doreen

knew that there had never been such a happy summer in her life.

Hilda Neale welcomed them home, standing on the wide steps as the car swung up the avenue and turned the corner past the rhododendrons in heavy buds. It seemed to Doreen that there was something baleful about her as she stood there, and she hated herself for thinking this. She looked older, and her white hair glistening in the sunshine gave her a new appearance. But she was smiling and affable.

She led the way upstairs to show Doreen the way that the south wing had been altered to suit them. The walls had been painted with apple-green paint, and there were mauve silk curtains. The room opened into a sitting-room at the far end, and a mauve tiled bathroom to the right. Everything was modern. Doreen went to the window, and although she knew that she missed the mountains and that one side of her was hungry for the *Jungfrau*, as perhaps it would always be, she realised that there was something far more restful about the present scene. There were the oaks and the elms clustering together, and the rhododendrons flanking the lake, and the magnolia tree just below the window, with its stiff shiny leaves, and in a few weeks' time its lemon-sweet flowers would open in great cups of blossom and exude their delicious perfume into this very room.

"You like it?" asked Hilda Neale.

"It is all beautiful."

"I thought you would be pleased." She hesitated a moment. "I expect you are glad to be

back here after so much wandering about. I always think that travel must be very amusing at first, but it is inclined to pall."

"Yes," said Doreen slowly.

Perhaps she gave Hilda Neale the suggestion that she did not want to talk, she did not know, but the door closed and she was left alone in the room which was like a new room, with its soft green and tender mauve, like lilac in spring, just as it would soon blossom in the shrubbery across the lake, and she would gather great boughs and bring into the house.

That was a wonderful summer.

Love had made a new man of Charles; he seemed to have dropped the years. He was younger, more active, gayer. He did not go up to London as he once had done, his career had paled before the demands that she made upon his time.

"But you oughtn't to give up, when you have gone so far," she said.

"Why not? I'm sick of careers. Let the younger men have a chance."

"But," she said, "if you went on now you might be a judge."

"Let those who want to be judges be judges. I am happy as I am. I only want to be with you."

It was highly flattering, but she was afraid that he would tire, and perhaps later on regret the fact that he had missed a judgeship.

"You needn't worry on that score," he said.

They could afford to be happy that summer, and they went long tours in the car and together

explored England. They were hardly at Clifton at all, only seeing it for week-ends. She had an idea that Hilda Neale did not approve of a young wife who took her husband so much away from home, but as time went on she had grown not to care what Miss Neale might think, but to go her own way.

They went up to the lakes. They walked by Wast Water, grimly severe, and by Rydal Water, with its white water-lilies and its exquisite reflections. They stood in Wordsworth's cottage.

"I don't think that even Switzerland is more lovely," she said.

"It's nice to hear you say that. It was the very thing I wanted you to say. So often you say the thing that I want you to say," and he held her hand closely.

They went to Scotland, and spent a whole three weeks in the West Highlands. They came home again through Wales, and she did not know when she had been happier.

But the last night of that tour was dismal, for it had come on to rain heavily. They had meant to stay in Snowdonia, but the rain was so severe that they did not feel tempted. They had to stop their journey at a wayside inn and ask for shelter, when really they had been making for a famous hotel that they had been told of.

The landlord, surprised to see strangers in such a state, took them in, rather unwillingly Doreen thought. He ushered them up a rickety staircase into a big room lit only by candlelight. He went ahead, holding high a couple of candles in brass sconces. The room smelt of must and dis-

use. It struck them both that the door had not been opened on to it for a long time. Its floor was humpy, and the big half-tester bed seemed to be in miniature in comparison to the size of the room in which it was placed. Charles advanced into that room, and as he did so he made a queer sound.

There, lying on the floor where it must have dropped before the empty fireplace, was a dead swallow, its wings flung wide as though in a final effort at flight.

He stepped back.

Doreen knew that he always thought single birds unlucky, and she took his hand.

"We won't stay here, dear; we'll go on. If we go slowly we shall be able to get through the rain somehow."

He said nothing. He followed her like a child down those unsafe stairs and across the little austere bar parlour out into the rain again and sank back in the car.

"My tablets," he said.

She felt in his pocket and brought out the bottle, counting out the couple of tablets with her fingers and putting them into his mouth. "Don't upset yourself, Charles; honestly it isn't worth it. That was a horrid room, but we aren't going to stay there."

He said nothing. Much later they got to the hotel they had been recommended, and went inside. They ordered dinner to be sent to their room. Doreen was horrified that Charles should look so old and tired, and could eat so little.

She said, "It wasn't unlucky really, you know,"

gauging his thoughts. "Don't worry about it. Let's forget it."

But it did seem that from the moment they had both seen the swallow lying there the bad luck started.

It was a difficult journey home, and they had an accident within twenty miles of Clifton. It was quite a minor accident, but Doreen was flung out and broke a wrist, and the effect of the shock and the fracture made her miserable for weeks. During those weeks she had to admit that Hilda Neale did all that she could for her, and saw after Charles wonderfully.

She thought that she liked Miss Neale better then than she had ever done. She actually looked forward to seeing her come into her room every morning for the menus for the day. They would chat about the garden and household affairs; it was quite surprising to find that Miss Neale had a sense of humour under that dour exterior.

"She isn't such a bad sort," Doreen told Charles.

"That was what I kept telling you. Her bark is worse than her bite. She'd do anything for you, and she is extremely loyal. I think those are sterling qualities one cannot overestimate."

"I'm glad she stayed with us."

"I know. I should have been very worried if she had insisted on going. After all, she is a remote connection of my mother's, and it is not a very comfortable experience to think of a connection going round the world looking for a job when there might so easily be one for her here."

"I know."

That autumn, when Doreen had got over the accident, something else happened. She had not been well for some time and had attributed it to nerves and shock, when she became definitely weak. One day she fainted in the library for no reason, and Charles, hypersensitive on her behalf, sent for the village doctor.

The village doctor was a fat little man who arrived in a very small two-seater car and was full of his own dignity. He had long ago decided what ought to be the matter with young Mrs. Fayre, and was now delighted that he could tell her so.

There would be a baby.

It looked as though everything was turning out for the best, because both of them wanted a child more than anything else. Charles was particularly delighted.

Now he had forgotten the dead swallow which had lain so pathetically, its wings outspread, on the hearthrug of that frowsy little Welsh inn. He had forgotten many of those superstitions which had worried him before, and was busy making arrangements for his own nurseries to be reopened.

He and Doreen went to the top of the house and inspected them. Big nurseries, with the windows barred by the small iron bars with which youth is imprisoned.

He said: "I can't believe that we are really going to have a child who lives here as once I lived myself."

"We are going to be terribly happy, Charles?"

"Of course we are." He stood for a moment staring out at the view that he had remembered

for the whole of his life, and which had given him his first look at life. "Do you remember that Madonna who could grant wishes in the South of France? That was where I prayed for this."

She nodded.

"I prayed for it too," she said.

"We are very lucky people."

"The luckiest in the world." And now she decided that she would not be disturbed by foolish anxieties; everything else had faded before the tremendous enthusiasm with which they greeted the future.

They lived only for the Easter, when the baby would be born.

CHAPTER XII

Dream that the lips once breathless
Might quicken if they would;
Say that the soul is deathless,
Dream that the gods are good;
Say March may wed September
And time divorce regret;
But not that you remember,
And not that I forget.

SWINBURNE.

THAT Christmas was quieter than the last, and full of preparations and thoughts of a year ahead, when there would be a stocking to fill and a tree to trim for a small child to enjoy.

These days Charles did not mention superstition because he had learnt that she disliked it; she hoped that perhaps he was getting over it. Neither of them referred to the robins that winter, and were happier for it.

The spring broke early, astonishingly mild, and early in February Doreen brought a bowl of snowdrops to her room and stood them on her writing-desk in moss.

Charles saw them. He was coming in to ask her about some payments when he stopped dead and stared at them as though he had seen death.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Snowdrops. They are the unluckiest flowers to bring into a house, worse than may."

"But they are so pretty. They seem to fit into this room with the mauve and greenness I thought you'd like them."

He was obviously very worried.

"They bring death into the house," he said.

She was irritated that he should suggest anything so foolish. "Surely, Charles, you do realise that is idiotic. How can any particular flower bring death into the house? Just the same as some people think may is wrong. May has never yet harmed anybody, it never will."

"I wish you'd throw those snowdrops away."

She wheeled round sharply.

"I won't. I refuse to pander to your silly superstitions. There is nothing in it at all, and it is quite wrong to allow such absurd ideas to have a hold on you."

"It isn't a silly idea."

"There is nothing in it at all. How could a flower bring death into a house?"

Then she knew that Hilda Neale had come into the room, walking very quietly as she always did, and standing now on the threshold, where she had probably heard every word. Charles turned to go, and then saw her.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Neale. And then, as though she were offering to help: "Shall I take the snowdrops away?"

"No," said Doreen, "I refuse to part with them. It is quite idiotic the way you two think out these silly, thready old superstitions. The snowdrops are to stay."

Hilda Neale said: "You may be very sorry, Mrs. Fayre; you may regret it very much one day."

"Then I will regret it, but the snowdrops stay where they are." She was definitely insistent.

Afterwards she wondered if she had done right in being so persistent. She felt young and helpless over it, and even wondered if there might be anything in their story, hastily condemning herself for such weakness. She knew that Charles had not forgotten the snowdrops, and promised herself that she would be more careful when the may came along. Then the baby would be born, of course.

Easter fell fully early, at the end of a mild March, when the wood violets were smelling sweetly in the woods and the little fragile anemones blowing under the trees. On the Good Friday Doreen had a sudden yearning to see the sea, and, as it was within a car ride, Charles took her down. They went to a lone beach that they knew of and sat there talking. They had brought a picnic with them, and because it was such a lovely day and so warmly pleasant, and because she felt so happy there with him, they stayed later than they should have done, talking.

The journey home was not a comfortable one, for the roads were full of traffic wending its way Londonwards, and it became clogged so that they could only proceed at a crawl. Doreen was overtired. She had not realised that it was so late, nor that she would feel so worn out. Charles, anxious for her, could not make headway against the stream of traffic. They crawled in home when it was very late indeed.

Doreen went to bed, but she could not sleep. Twenty-four hours later her son was born dead.

When she came out of the haze of chloroform she knew what had happened, and she also knew

that Charles would blame the snowdrops for it. In this very room they had stood in their big bowl with the moss. In this very room. Hilda Neale had said, "You may regret this, Mrs. Fayre," and now the baby was dead, and there was something inside her that seemed suddenly to have stopped still, like hope, dammed by the fierce tide of a river, like joy suddenly gone dim.

Charles was terribly kind about it.

Three days later she had to tell him what was worrying her. "You feel that it was the snowdrops. I know you feel that it was all because of the snowdrops?"

"No," he said, "I don't think that. Even I don't think that."

But he did not deceive her.

"We shall have other children," she whispered.

"Yes, of course."

But there was nothing convincing about his tone, and she knew that he was very unhappy.

But they did not have another child.

That was the irony of it. The summer came, and she grew strong and well. She played tennis, she went to picnics. Nobody would have guessed that only this Easter she had lost her first baby, she seemed to be so strong and well. She kept on hoping that one of these days fate would play into her hands.

"We shall have another baby, perhaps by this time next year," she told Charles.

"Perhaps," he agreed.

And all the time she knew that she wouldn't. She knew, too, that the wall of reserve which had been between her and Hilda Neale was now in

a lesser degree between her and her husband. She did not understand how or why, but there it was. He had been worried that she should think it was through his superstition about the snowdrops, and now he tried to hide that side of his nature from her.

"Oh, I'm silly, I'm idiotic," she told herself, and kept trying to tear down that wall of reserve, and couldn't.

The following spring, two years after her marriage, she met Peter.

She had been so sure of herself, so certain with the knowledge of youth which cannot believe that there is anything that it does not know. She had never thought for a single moment that there would ever be anybody else save Charles. She loved him, she told herself, she loved him devotedly, and anyone who loves that way cannot think of another man.

Then she went to the picnic given by the Flowers, a supper picnic on the river. Four puntloads of them, and the sun going down behind the willows, and the lilies flying amongst their flat leaves on the surface of the water.

A gramophone played "Oh, Lovely Night." She did not think that she would ever forget it.

She saw Peter when they started. Young. Probably only a couple of years her senior, and back on leave from India. He was very tall, and very dark, and she knew that suddenly she was aware of a liking for jet black hair of that particular kind. Dark eyes with a twinkle in them, a super-sensitive mouth. Yes, I like him, she told herself.

Today Charles was not with her. He had not

been too well lately, his old trouble lumbago had overtaken him and the idea of a picnic of this kind was out of the question. She had left home regretfully; it seemed too bad to leave him there alone, though, of course, Hilda Neale would see after him and she could be relied upon to do everything that she could for him. That was her one strong point.

"You go and enjoy yourself," Charles had said, and she had left him on the library sofa, with the big picture of himself, when he had taken silk, hanging from the wall above the high mantel.

She had come to know that he was very proud of that picture.

She happened to be in the punt with Peter.

"My nephew," said Mrs. Flower, who had given the picnic; "he is home from India, two months' more leave, and he says the most lovely thing he has ever seen is a wet day in June in England. The boy must be mad," and off she went to the other guests.

Doreen turned to him.

"I can understand that," she said.

"After all those dried-up hills, and those parched little valleys, rain does seem very much like a miracle."

"Of course it does."

She got into the boat and sat down among the cushions, vividly red reflected in the water. There is something very lovely about a river in summer, and she knew that it had never been lovelier than tonight. At the other end of the boat were two strangers; nobody was beside her as she sat there watching Peter punting. Very

tall. Very slight. It occurred to her that he did not have lumbago, and she dismissed the idea as being silly. She must not think ridiculous things like that.

It must have taken over two hours getting upstream, though they would drift back easily enough in the moonlight. As they neared the beauty spot where they meant to picnic the sunshine had died away, and there was that first amethyst wonder of night. A dimming of the leaves, a merging into branches, a milky pallor upon the face of the water, and a smudge of white where the lilies blew against their dark round leaves.

"Here we are at last," said Peter, and tied the boat to a willow trunk.

They got out.

Now it seemed to be all flurry and bustle, the arranging of rugs and punt cushions around the communal picnic table. "A supper picnic was so much better than a tea one," she thought. She liked it. She sat there and all the time she knew that she was waiting. Not for food as these other people were doing. She was sitting here knowing that very soon Peter would come to her side. Knowing that when he had finished helping Mrs. Flower he would make some excuse to come to her. It was idiotic to know this, but she did know it because the whole thing was inescapable.

Inside her she panicked a little.

She remembered what Charles had said long ago; anyway, it seemed an eternity ago, about if the other man came into her life. He would stand back. It was stupid to think of Peter as

being the other man, somebody she had met at a landing stage and had known only for the couple of hours that it had taken to come up the river. Somebody who, inside a couple of months, would be sailing back to India again.

All the same she was thinking of him this way.

She sat there and she knew that she looked lovely, she knew that she was at her best, the girl waiting for her love. It was as though she could see ahead for a moment, as though she could peep through the vista of a mountain pass as she had done when she was at the convent, and could glimpse the *Jungfrau* beyond. So big that it almost frightened her! So grand that suddenly she felt enthusiastic!

The supper was laid, and she had been quite right. Here was Peter coming to her side.

"May I share your cushion?"

"Of course," and she had known it all the time.

They talked ordinarily of the little casual everyday things, the picnic, the river, the country here, the Flowers. Yet suddenly they were not ordinary and everyday things because the two of them were talking about it. Just those two.

"You live here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I didn't always, you know, I was brought up in Switzerland."

"I always used to go there for winter sports. It's a grand place, isn't it?"

"I loved it, but I got very sick of being at school there. School is rather different from winter sports."

"So I imagine. Where were you?"

She told him.

"And your people, did they live here?"

It was curious that when he asked her this she did not gib at the answer. She told him quite calmly, the thing that she had been ashamed to admit before. Her mother was an actress, who had done well in Paris, and who had made a great name for herself. She had been burnt to death when the Théâtre Frivolity had been burnt down.

"You must have been desperately upset," said he.

"I had never seen my mother."

"Never seen her?"

Somebody passed round the champagne and the sandwiches. She took one, and watched him pour her out the glass.

"No, you see she didn't want me. She wasn't married, and I was pushed out on to an old nurse my guardian knew. The nurse saw after me till she died, then I went to the convent. I stayed there till my guardian came and took me away."

"And your guardian lives here?" He leaned forward. "It all sounds most exciting."

"None of that was very exciting really. Living life is never half as exciting as talking about it, I suppose, that is the truth."

"You are philosophic."

"Am I?"

He said: "And now I suppose you have a very gay time, lots of parties and fun."

"My husband isn't very fond of parties?"

"Your husband?"

She knew then that she had dropped a stone into a quiet mill pool and had set the water flurrying.

"You're not married?"

"I've been married nearly two years to my guardian."

He stared at her; she knew that thoughts were racing through his mind, but he said nothing, only after a long pause: "Well, well, well."

"You sound very surprised."

"I am. You must have been awfully young marrying out of the schoolroom like that."

"Yes, but I'm terribly fond of Charles. He is a dear. A barrister, you know."

"I see," and she knew that he did not want to talk about Charles at all. He changed the subject adroitly.

They talked of India, gaily, and she asked the ordinary questions and he gave the ordinary answers. She wanted to ask him about himself, but she dared not. Not then. She talked of the Taj Mahal, of Bombay, of Calcutta, of Kashmir. Kashmir, she understood, was the loveliest place that had ever been.

"I shall go for my honeymoon to Kashmir," he said: "it ought to be kept solely for honeymoon couples. It is that kind of a place."

"We went to the South of France."

"I had an idea that you might," he said.

"Why?" She did not know but it annoyed her.

"Because all English people have not a mind beyond the South of France. Because so few dare to be original."

She said "Oh", rather vaguely.

"If I had been in London do you think I should have taken you to the South of France?" he asked.

She knew that the conversation had taken a personal turn and that she wanted to stop it, but already it was too late. There was nothing that she could do. She said nothing but looked at him quite helplessly.

"I should have taken you to a little island that I know of off Scotland. It's wild there, only a farmhouse, and the sea birds, and the waves breaking on the shore. But it's grand all the same."

She was very quiet: then, when she had recovered herself, she said in as matter-of-fact a voice as she could muster: "It would have been glorious in the February, I imagine," and hoped that he accepted the snub.

Instead he laughed.

He was different from anybody else that she had ever met, quite different, and he left her with a feeling of helplessness that she could not check.

She tried to drag others into the conversation. In that way he would realise surely that she could not go on with it.

They danced to the gramophone afterwards. The grass was very short clipped, and the moon had come out from behind a welter of cloud which was clearing off. It shone in a lovely silver stream upon the river, and was flanked by stars. There were the curious little sounds of night, of wind in the willows, of little animals searching for food, and once the beating of the big wings of an owl.

They danced, and she knew that she would have to dance with Peter. Something in her warned her not to do it, but the longing which

was the other side of her was too intense. It would not be thrust aside. She had to dance with him.

Then when the music stopped they went down to the water's edge and sat there among the shadows, watching the moon on the river itself.

They were almost like two shadows, she thought. He did not annoy her any more. He told her about his own life, one of a family of boys brought up in a country rectory on the Welsh border. Large and bleak, and not very amusing, save that there was good fishing and shooting, and he had always been an outdoor person.

He told her about his mother, and she knew that once she had been told that when a man talks of his mother, he is in his most dangerous mood. He told her of how he had gone out to India and how he had loved the life there. He was almost glad that this leave was coming to an end, because he wanted to be back; he missed the polo so much. Nobody unless they were a Cræsus could play polo in England.

And all the time she knew that she was getting to know him better, and that all the time he was doing things to her heart that Charles had never been able to do. She ought not to be sitting here and feeling like this.

He said: "I may come to see you some time, perhaps?"

No, no, she told herself, and then in spite of it heard her own voice saying, "Yes, please," and giving him directions of how to get there from the Flowers'.

Then they danced again.

She kept on trying to believe that it was all a

dream, something which would die with the morning. But midnight came, and Cinderella's frock did not turn to rags. That was only a fairy tale. They got into the punts, and now they would be going downstream and it would be easy work. They arranged them in tow. That meant that Peter could sit here beside her in the boat, very close. Mrs. Flower put a rug over them.

"It may be cold. The dew is falling," she said.

Somebody put on a gramophone all those sweetest records: "Samson and Delilah", "Ring on, Sweet Angelus", "Il Travatore".

As the punt drifted down this unreal river, made fantastic by the silver and darkness of the night, he put out a hand and took hers. It was under cover of the blanket. She ought to draw her own away, she knew, but somehow she couldn't. She did not know what had come over her.

She felt that his hand was young and compelling and very strong. She knew the feel of Charles' hands so well, the little wrinkles, the tiny mole, the slight swelling of the knuckles, and now suddenly she was comparing his hand with Peter's, quite, quite wrongly, and she realised it.

So they came to the landing-stage, and climbed out rather stiffly, and into the cars. They said goodnight.

And all the time she knew that it wasn't goodnight; it was the worst possible night that could have been.

CHAPTER XIII

I love thee with a love I cannot see,
With my lost saints, I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears of all my life! And if God choose
I shall but love thee better after death.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

DOREEN had hoped that Peter, when he thought things over, would not come to Clifton. The friendship should have ceased there that night on the landing-stage; it should not have gone on, because it could come to no fruition, and, anyhow, as in her heart she knew, it was not friendship at all.

She told herself when she woke much later on the following morning in her own room at home, that surely he would realise this and keep away. She tried to pretend that she had dreamt the beauty of last night, and that she need not be afraid. If she never saw him again then it would not matter. Charles would never know, and she could silence any regrets which tried to rear themselves in her mind.

She was married to Charles, and she must stay married to him. Whatever kindly offer he had made before their marriage, however understanding he was, he must not be allowed to know that for one single night in her life there had been somebody else.

So she was reticent when he asked her about the party. His lumbago was better and he was sitting on the loggia in the sunshine when she

came downstairs. She had put on a new frock, lime green, with a big leghorn hat. He glanced across at it.

"Where did you get that frock?"

She said: "The shop sent a couple of linen frocks down for me to look at. I picked on this one. It looked like a June day."

"Wear a green frock and you wear a black one," he said, and she knew that although he said it gently in his heart he was reproachful.

"Oh, Charles, that is such nonsense. I thought you'd grown older and wiser than that."

"I'll never outgrow some of those things, because they do come awfully true."

She shook her head. "No, that is just silly."

He said no more, but she was annoyed about it, and even still more annoyed because a certain uneasiness had come into her own mind and she was genuinely concerned about the whole thing. She did not like it at all.

"You're very quiet about the party," he said later. "I don't believe you enjoyed yourself."

"I didn't much," she lied.

"I expect you don't like going out without me. You're a darling kid, aren't you?" and he smoothed her hand with that tender little gesture of his. She wished that he had not touched her hand, it reminded her of last night, only Peter's fingers had been smooth and unwrinkled, and his clasp had been stronger. She was irritated that she should feel like this. It was all wrong.

"I expect that's it," she said, only to hide her real feelings, and again she was very angry.

They walked over to the lawn: he could not stand quite upright yet and leaned a little. To-day, probably because she was tired, all these silly little stupidities seemed to combine to annoy her. She was indignant with herself.

But Peter did not come.

He won't, of course, she told herself, and started to delude herself into believing that perhaps she had imagined the whole thing and that he was one of those men who are born flirtatious, and who must have a good time and do not care what happens besides it.

For two days she went on in this fool's paradise, believing that the thing was ended. Then in the middle afternoon she went out to gather flowers for the table. The sweet peas were dead, she had noticed them dropping at lunch-time.

"I'll gather some more," she said.

It was Hilda Neale who brought the basket and came with her to where the sweet peas grew, climbing up their tall sticks into the sky, almost like the beans that Jack planted for his beanstalk.

"Is that a car coming?" asked Hilda Neale, suddenly turning.

Instinctively Doreen knew. The drive curled beside the sweet peas. She could see the car approaching, a small sports car, very different from anything that Charles would have, a little car which came fast and was driven by a young man with no hat and very dark hair.

As she recognised him she knew that she could not hide what she was feeling. "Oh!" she said quickly, "oh!" and drew back.

"What is the matter?"

"It's nothing," she said, "nothing at all."

But although she might deceive Charles, and even herself, she could not deceive Hilda Neale, and she ought to have known it. Those penetrating eyes had read down into her heart and knew what had happened as plainly as if she had laid the whole thing bare. The picnic, their talk, sitting beside the river like a couple of shadows, and coming home to the sound of the music, hand in hand, drifting down the stream which is life.

"Shall I take the flowers?" asked Miss Neale, and removed the basket. "You'd better go and see him."

She stepped out from the rows of sweet peas, and she knew that she was wearing the lime green dress, and for a moment the silly superstition rushed to her head. She was getting as foolish as Charles.

She went very slowly into the house. Outside the door she saw the sports car standing; it was littered with the careless junk of a young man—a white rubber helmet, big gloves, a book of maps, a pipe. She liked the look of them, yet at the same time was angry with herself that they made her palnitate.

He and Charles were not in the library and, looking out, she saw that they were on the loggia. He was sitting on the low brick parapet talking earnestly to Charles in his big chair. Brick parapet, big chair! It was queer that the two things should define the two men so clearly.

"Now," she thought, "I must be calm and dignified and very cold. He has got to realise that he

can't come here. I can't have him coming into this house and making me feel like this. It has got to stop."

It wasn't going to be too easy.

She went to them with dignity. She received him as she would have received the vicar's wife, and she showed no special interest. When tea came she poured it out without any sign of enthusiasm. But what she had not reckoned on was the fact that Charles should be so delighted with Peter. In his youth he had stayed in the neighbourhood of that Welsh border and loved it dearly. He had, in fact, met Peter's father. They talked like the dearest old friends, tied fast by the bond of friendship.

"You must come again," said Charles, and now nothing would stop him. "What about dining with us next Friday? Yes, do dine with us next Friday."

"I'd be delighted," said Peter.

She said nothing at all.

He ought to know that he could not come here like this. He ought to have the decency to stop away. Surely he realised that Charles was the kindest, most generous creature, and had no idea what was afoot. He *must* know.

"I shall write him a letter and tell him not to come," thought Doreen, and now she realised that matters might be rather desperate. This was not the sort of thing that could be stopped inside five minutes.

She did not see him alone save for a few seconds when they went across the drawing-room to the french windows to go out to the car.

Then he said: "You are angry with me for coming?"

"Am I?" she said evasively.

"You know I asked you if I might, and you did say yes."

Which was true.

"Yes, I did," she agreed.

"Then I don't see how you can be so annoyed with me?"

There was nothing for it but to go back on her word, and when he spoke like that, rather like a hurt child, she felt ashamed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to be annoyed. I . . . I have a headache today. . . ."

The woman's old excuse.

"I'm terribly sorry. I misjudged you, I'm afraid."

If only she had had the courage to stay firm and to keep her stand of disapprobation it would have been different, but now she had gone back on it, she had spoilt the whole afternoon.

And she would not ask him to postpone coming to dine on Friday.

Indeed, instead of writing to him she took conspicuous care about her clothes. She wore the cream georgette frock, softly clinging, with the light gold belt, and the yellow roses on the shoulder. It was a cold evening, and she selected the little sable wrap to go with it, which had been one of Charles' extravagant presents to her.

She knew that she looked lovely, and she wanted to look particularly lovely tonight.

Peter had arrived when she went downstairs.

He was having a cocktail with Charles in the library and they were talking together as though they were old friends. She knew as she crossed the hall that she ought to have done something to stop this, but she hadn't known what to do. The tide seemed to be carrying them both along.

"Never mind," she told herself. "It must end. After all, he has to go back to Bombay in seven weeks' time. That isn't long enough for anything to happen."

But she had made a sad miscalculation of human emotions!

She heard Charles say as she reached out her hand to open the door:

"I'm so pleased for Doreen to have a friend her own age. She has been too much with old people. That convent, you know, awfully worthy and all that, but very *old*. And now having married an old fogey!"

"Nonsense, nonsense!"

"Well, I'm old enough to be her father, and the girl needs youth. I'm very pleased to welcome you here."

She hadn't realised that she was actually listening at the door, listening with some horror. Was Charles doing this on purpose? She went in.

The only person really at ease through that dinner was Charles himself, and he was gay and happy and cheerful over things. He did not realise that anything was amiss. Doreen was looking very beautiful, disturbingly so, Peter found, and he could not refrain from looking at her. Doreen was conscious of her power.

Afterwards they had coffee on the loggia, and again it was a dangerous mixture of lovely summer's evening and rising night.

Hilda Neale came out for a moment. Doreen knew that it was with some excuse. She spoke to Charles, and apparently did not notice the other two, but just as she went again Doreen caught her eye and saw the danger signal in it. She was an enemy. She ought never to have stayed on here, and now it was too late to be rid of her.

Peter stayed until midnight. When he had gone Doreen made an excuse to go to bed.

"I'm afraid you're tired; you were very quiet tonight," said Charles, and he kissed her tenderly. "I'm sorry, because I thought you would enjoy having your young friend here."

"I enjoyed myself very much." And she kissed him back. "It is just that I am tired."

In her own room she stared helplessly out at the lake with the reeds grown quiet around it, and the cedars, as always, still. If only the affair would end here and now. But it wouldn't. She knew quite well that it wouldn't.

Three days later she went to the far end of the lake to bathe. It was secluded here, and there was a pool which Charles had had improved for her. She liked the new diving-board and the faint smell of weed in the water. It was a beautiful swim, and she came out and lay down on the grass under the oak-tree. The sunshine splashed impudently between the leaves and was gloriously hot. She supposed that she must have fallen asleep, because she woke with a start, aware that

somebody was coming across the little field towards her, and also conscious that it was Peter.

"You!" she exclaimed.

"I'm sorry. Miss Neale told me that I should find you here."

"She had no right to tell you anything of the sort."

He said again: "I'm sorry. Look here, shall I go away? I rather envied you your bathe, that's all."

She realised that she had been very rude and snappy, and relented. It was wrong of Hilda Neale to send visitors to her when she was bathing, and she would speak about it, but it was stupid of her to snap Peter's head off for it.

She said: "Would you like a bathe yourself? There is some gear in the bathing-hut Charles had built over there."

"I'd adore it."

She watched him disappear into the hut, and sat there hugging her knees. When he came out again he challenged her to a swim. They went off the two diving-boards together, and out through the water. He had a job to beat her. She had not known that she was so strong, she had not realised what fun it was to have competition. Charles never bathed. It was the first time that a man had raced her in the water, and she enjoyed it.

He showed her tricks.

They came out and sat in the field together in the sun. She took off her cap and let her hair blow free. It was a glorious afternoon.

"Now," he said, "you are not so angry with Miss Neale for sending me to see you?"

"Of course not."

"Why do you get so snappy? Why are you so on your dignity? Why is it that you are friendly one moment and the next are ready to bite my head off?"

"I don't know," she said.

"I think you're a bit of a problem."

"I think I feel like a bit of a problem."

"You've got an awfully nice husband, you know."

"Thank you, I do know. I chose him."

He leaned forward and flicked her ankles with a long piece of grass. "Let me tell you that you did nothing of the sort. There was no question of choice about it. You married the first man who asked you. That's a fact, isn't it?"

She felt annoyed again. "If it is a fact it is my business."

"And up go the prickles!" he answered.

"Sorry."

"I'm sorry that I annoy you so much."

"You don't really." She got up and stretched herself. "Now, what about going in to tea? It'll take us some time to change."

"All right."

She said suddenly: "I've enjoyed this afternoon more than I can say. Oh, I dare say you think me being silly, but I've loved every moment of it. There has never been an afternoon like it in my life before. I've always had to do everything alone."

"You poor dear! Let's swim again together. What about riding?"

"I ride very badly."

"All the same, it would be fun. I might be able to teach you a thing or two."

"I think I'd like to learn."

And now the longing to be amused was something that she could not put the brake upon. After all, he was leaving so soon: how could it matter very much?

"I challenge you to tennis after tea?" he suggested.

"Taken," she said, and started running towards the house to dress. She felt gay. She felt young. She was appreciating the fact that the mill never grinds with the water that is past. Seven weeks was no time really. Why not enjoy herself whilst she could?

CHAPTER XIV

There was a music in the early air,
When our young love was virgin as we were,
Ripe for the rose, new to the nightingale.

GERALD GOULD

Now they were inseparable.

They swam together and played tennis. they rode together in the evening, and he taught her to manage the chestnut cob and how to mount. and not to be afraid when she jumped.

There was so much that was fresh for her to learn.

"I like to see it, my dear," said Charles approvingly. "It is a good thing to see you so happy and enjoying yourself. I'm glad."

"It is fun having somebody to play with."

"Afraid I never was much of a sportsman myself." And Charles grinned. "There wasn't time for work and play in my life, and I was one of those people who preferred the mental side."

"That sounds awfully grand."

"It isn't meant grandly. I never wanted to be a blue stocking; it was just that mental exercise appealed to me and physical exercise didn't."

And she had always been one of those people to whom physical exercise did appeal. It was splendid to have somebody to go about with.

"I'm getting quite good at riding," she told Charles at the end of a fortnight. "I was always frightened before. I didn't know it, but I was. Peter knew it too, and he cured it. Now that I'm

not a bit frightened it is the greatest possible fun."

"I'm sure that it is."

"You don't mind my doing this?"

"Mind? Why, I'm glad! I am tremendously glad."

And all the time she knew that Hilda Neale was watching her, putting two and two together, and making strange deductions. There was nothing about Miss Neale that she could challenge, she never made any open remark, she never went out of her way to show that she noticed, but at the same time Doreen knew about it.

She wanted to challenge her herself.

She wanted to speak to her and to tell her that she did not care; she would go her own way, whatever happened, and it was unimportant to her what Miss Neale thought, but she knew that would be foolish and rather young, and could only lead to worse complications.

It was absurd, too, that she took offence at a remark Mrs. Flower dropped one day. Mrs. Flower had asked her over to tea, and she and Peter had ridden over together. He had come to fetch her.

It was just as Doreen was ready to start for home. She stood on the steps with Mrs. Flower whilst Peter down below was with the horses, fixing Bess's saddle.

Mrs. Flower said: "He is a very attractive young man, isn't he?"

"He is a jolly good companion."

She thought that Mrs. Flower looked at her curiously, and in her heart resented it.

"You mustn't take him too seriously," she was saying.

"I'm hardly likely to. I'm married."

"Yes, of course." But there was something about her manner to which Doreen took exception. It wasn't easy. It was the manner of somebody who is holding something back. There was something that she did not say.

But riding home she forgot it.

"Race you to the gate," said Peter.

"Too hot to race."

"You're getting lazy."

"No, I'm not. I want to dawdle. It is such a lovely warm evening, why spoil it by racing?"

"Let's make the most of it."

She thought: "In five weeks' time—less—he will have sailed, and I shall never see him again. I don't think I can bear it." But she knew that she had got to bear it, and it was futile trying to put him out of her mind now. When the ship had gone it would be different. When the friendship was ended with that abrupt severance, then probably it would be very much easier. She would leave that moment until it actually happened; nothing was to be gained by dragging it out now.

When she got home she thought that Charles was looking rather ill.

"Anything the matter?" she asked him.

"I had another of my attacks," he said.

"What happened?"

"It was very stupid of me, but I got worried about the jays making such a noise in the garden, and then, when I felt the attack starting, I had

not get my tablets with me. I'd left them on my dressing-table. My own fault."

"You mean you had not got them here to take?" she gasped.

"That was exactly it."

"Charles, what did you do?"

"I had a few very uncomfortable moments."

She sat down on the *chaise-longue* at his feet, and she felt contrite. She had had no right to be away riding when he was feeling so ill.

"You don't think that it is worse lately, do you?" she asked.

"No, I think it is about the same."

"I wish you'd go and see that nice old doc. about it. You said that he did you a lot of good before; why not give him another chance?"

"If you like, I will," he agreed.

She might have guessed that something was very wrong by the fact that he fell in with her wishes so easily. He had been very frightened.

"Make an appointment for next week: perhaps the tablets aren't strong enough."

"I hardly think that. You couldn't expect them to do much good if they were on my dressing-table and not in my pocket. It was all my own fault."

She insisted again at dinner, and dragged Hilda Neale into it.

"Please," she said, "if Mr. Fayre does not telephone, will you arrange with Dr. McArthur. It worries me that he should have these attacks."

"Naturally, it is very alarming," said Miss Neale. But as it happened there needed no prompting, because Charles made the appoint-

ment himself the very next morning on the telephone. He told Doreen about it as a joke.

"Another fiver gone west," he said, "and I don't believe that the old heart is twopennyworth worse; it was my getting so worried about those jays."

"But how could you let them worry you?"

"They've never brought me much luck, and now there are dozens of them in the garden screaming their heads off. I've told the gardeners to shoot them, but they're ham-handed with a gun."

"Why don't you shoot them yourself?"

"I wouldn't like to," he said, and she knew that for some strange reason he felt superstitious about that, too. There was no accounting for the curious way in which this sort of thing took him.

"All right," she said.

Charles was feeling far more worried than he gave her to understand. For some time now these attacks had been recurring. He did not think that they were actually worse, but they were definitely more frequent. He did not like to make Doreen anxious about them because he felt that at her age she ought not to be bothered with maladies and sickness and all the panoply which come with life's autumn.

He felt older than he should for his age; after all, nowadays sixty was nothing. There were men of his age who played a good game of golf, and went round the links again in the evening and felt all the better for it. He was too inclined to cling to his armchair, and it was grossly unfair on so young a wife.

For that reason he had welcomed Peter to the house. He had thought that it would be somebody to amuse her, and she must need amusement.

He had been ashamed that later, when he had encouraged this as much as he could, he should suddenly feel jealous. He should suddenly feel disgruntled and envious of Peter that he could take so much exercise and be so amusing, and so lithe, and so young.

Charles kept telling himself that it was that very anxiety which had brought on this attack, and that it was his own fault.

It was funny that he should confide in Hilda Neale. It was the fact that she had been here so long, so much longer than Doreen, and being older he could turn to her.

"Your heart's bad again?" she said one afternoon when Doreen was on the hard courts in her slim shorts with Peter playing a hard game.

"Yes, it has been worrying me a good bit lately. Sickening, isn't it?"

"And you are going to see Dr. McArthur?"

"Yes."

She nodded primly and her very look gave away the fact that she had expected this. She had thought that there would be difficulties when he married so young a wife. Her lips said nothing; it was her eyes that he could not silence.

"Maybe you ought to rest more?" she said.

"I'm resting all the time."

"You could do more. I get very tired. I know what it is. Ever since that pneumonia, I've never

felt the same woman. I suppose one can't expect it as one gets older."

"I suppose not," he agreed.

The wind brought their voices from the courts to the two on the loggia. Gay voices. Doreen giving the score, the swing of a racket, and the crash as the ball went across the net. It was all very well telling himself that "youth's a stuff, 'twill not endure": for the moment youth was enduring, and enduring very well.

"You will do what the doctor tells you?" she asked quietly.

"Of course I shall. It is much too painful a complaint to want to do anything else, and although it may not kill it can hurt like hell."

She said nothing, but moved about the place tidying this and that; then she said softly, as if to herself, "Of course, pain alone can kill," and he wondered if she meant it as a threat.

He was thinking of that next morning when he went up to London. Pain alone will kill. He did not want to die. He hated the very thought of death, and had always argued unreasonably that it was such an unfitting end. He would have liked to live for ever, and more so now when he had Doreen to care for.

He had driven up with the chauffeur.

"I'd like to come with you," Doreen had said when she heard that he was going for the over-haul today.

"I'd rather go alone."

"Why? Surely a wife's place is beside her husband on such a journey. I hate to think of you going all alone."

"I'd much rather go alone. Take my medicine like a good boy. I'd rather be alone."

"You'll promise to tell me everything that he says."

"Of course. Everything."

He was remembering that as he turned on to the Sidcup bypass on the way to London. It was a radiant morning, one of those mornings when it was good to be alive, and he had even less inclination towards dying than before.

There was a heat haze over Shooter's Hill and the promise of a lazy day drawing itself out of the mist and very hot later on.

It was a day that it was good to be alive, and nothing could dim Charles' feelings about it. Just recently he had felt rather depressed about himself. He was passing out of that stage. He was passing into one when he could feel better and brighter.

He was sure that Dr. McArthur would reassure him and make him feel a new man. Perhaps after this he and Doreen would go for a little holiday. He'd like to see Switzerland again, with the wild-flowers sloping down the mountains and the chalets radiant in the sunshine. He would like to visit the Tyrol, which he had always felt was a better kind of Switzerland.

He sat back lazily weaving dreams for the future. There was so much that he wanted to do and, given time and the opportunity, he'd do it.

The car turned sharply into the London traffic; it was converging from either side, and ahead of them was a little crowd. Charles sat up quickly and stared.

A girl had been knocked off a bicycle; she lay on the pavement, and his was the first car to approach her. The chauffeur jammed on the brakes.

"Better stop, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly. Perhaps we could take her to hospital."

He got out.

The girl had a twisted ankle, and sat there staring at it ruefully, as though she could not understand what had happened. In an instant Charles saw that she wore a green frock. He did not know why that was the first thing which impressed itself on his mind, but he saw it immediately and knew that it made him feel cold.

"Can I help?" he asked. "Could I take her to hospital?"

A woman standing on the kerb said: "Oh, if you would! It's a mile to the hospital. The policeman has gone to see if he could get an ambulance."

The girl was looking up at him pathetically.

"I don't want to go in an ambulance."

"Certainly not. I'll take you in my car."

Between them, he and the chauffeur lifted her in. He turned to the woman and suggested that she should come, too.

"Oh, very well, but it really isn't anything to do with me. I just happened to be passing by and saw it happen," she said. "It was a car, you know, and he drove on."

"Young and thoughtless," thought Charles, and then he remembered that men of his age

always condemned youth. They felt that youth in itself was wrong.

"It's hurting so much," said the girl pitifully.

"We won't be long," he said.

He sat there holding her in the car, whilst the woman instructed the chauffeur where to go. Round the next corner, cutting up drab little streets, crossing another big thoroughfare, and then to a halt before a big building which stretched all down the side of one street.

Almost instantly the door of the accident side opened and there were stretcher-bearers, white-coated men, and a nurse to their aid.

Charles had to go inside and to give his name and address. He saw the hospital admit the little girl in green, and he said goodbye to the woman.

"I can't stay; I would if I could, but I have a Harley Street appointment," and he walked out.

"Good luck," said the young doctor on duty; "hope it's nothing too dud."

"Oh no. Old age. A fluttery heart. A bit of nonsense," and he spoke about it a great deal more carelessly than he felt.

He stepped back into the car.

"Harley Street," he told the chauffeur.

The car moved on again, through the enclosing traffic of the south-east of London, nosing its way through wagons and petrol lorries and merchandise, until it came to Vauxhall Bridge. Then suddenly something directed Charles' attention to the floor. There was a trail of dust where the girl's foot had been, and from the shoes of the woman who had accompanied her. There was something else. Lying on the floor was a small

ring, probably the girl's engagement ring, which in the confusion had slipped from her finger. He stared at it desperately, and he knew that his mouth went dry and that he felt quite sick.

An opal looked up at him, milky and shot through with light, gold, like a fire, blue, and purple, and orange. It was a fascinating stone, but to him it meant disaster. There was nothing that he had been more afraid of than opals. He remembered how his mother had had a brooch with them in, a big brooch, with an enormous stone in the centre, and how his nurse had told him that it would bring harm to her. The very day that she had told him, drawing his attention to the fact that his mother was wearing it, she had slipped on the terrace and had hurt her hand as she put it out to save herself.

"That opal, you may be bound," the nurse had told him, "and she is lucky that it isn't something worse."

Now here on the floor of his car, tormenting him with its wicked flame, lay a little opal ring, and he knew that it spelt disaster.

Furtively he felt for the bottle of tablets in his pocket. He'd have to take a couple. He could not go on without, for his heart was making a curious sound, and there was that pricking pain down his right arm.

Shock, of course!

Very silly of him, but he had these feelings and he could not escape them. He felt desperately worried.

On the return journey they'd call in at the hospital and hand back the ring. The girl would

possibly be worried that she might have lost it. He picked it up and handed it through the window to the chauffeur. Somehow he could not bring himself to keep it.

"That girl must have dropped this ring."

"She must have done, sir."

"Would you take care of it until I've done. On the way back we'll call in at the hospital and leave it there for her, as she may be a bit worried about it."

"Yes, sir."

He took the ring, knowing quite well why it had been given to him to carry. The servants were accustomed to their master's ways, they knew that he was superstitious, and whilst the maids were interested the men thought it stupid and wondered that a man with such a wide outlook could feel so strongly as he apparently did about it.

They drove on.

The tablets had quieted Charles, but he knew that he felt wretched. Until this had happened he had been so sure that it was a good morning on which to be alive and that Dr. McArthur would be reassuring. Now he felt that disaster was overtaking him.

They drew up before the austere house in perhaps the grimmest street of all London. It runs in a straight line from Cavendish Square up to the Park. It is lined on either side by houses in which sentence of death is given every day of the week. That was the way that he was thinking of it as he stepped out of the car.

They might try to look gay, these houses; some had pink geraniums, some had red ones.

There were pert little curtains with frills, there were more rigorous net curtains. There were some of all sorts, but at the same time nothing could mask their meaning.

He wished that he could think of them as places out of which was given healing and the strength with which to continue, but he could not think of them that way. They were courts in which sentence of death was doled out.

"I may be some time," he told the chauffeur.

"Yes, sir."

He went into a Regency waiting-room; it was furnished with beautiful chairs, and it had a wide polished table on which lay magazines to suit any taste. He did not want to read. He looked at the oil-paintings on the walls. A shepherd boy with a herd of sheep and the mist coming over the far hills like a blue veil. A lake, very like one he knew in Italy, where he had been very happy; a ruined castle in the foreground, a sunset in the background.

He thought that if ever he had the designing of a doctor's waiting-room he would not make it like this. Too impersonal. Too remote. Beautiful, but with the beauty of a very haughty woman who does not want to be loved.

He sat there for a quarter of an hour. He supposed that, being late already, the doctor thought that he was within his rights eking out the time.

Then the butler swung open the door.

"If you please, sir."

They climbed a magnificent stairway with a deep red carpet and an oriel window. There was

nothing that was not old-fashioned and of another world about this house. Nothing that was not aloof and dignified.

Long ago a family had lived here, and all the intimate details of family life had been enacted. A mother had walked up these same stairs, and children had peeped through the iron lace of the banister, staring down into the hall where the grown-up people lived, in wonder and anticipation of the time when they also would be grown up.

That was a century ago.

Now it was just a house where patients came and went, toiled up the stairs and toiled down feeling probably older and nearer to that end which lies in wait for all men.

He must not feel so depressed.

Dr. McArthur received him cheerfully; it was the irritating cheerfulness of the doctor in the sixties, who believes that he has what is medically known as "an excellent manner".

He referred to his notes, saying that it was a long time since they had met. He hoped he saw his patient well. For the first time in his life Charles wanted to snap at him, because it seemed a remote chance that he would be feeling well if he were visiting his doctor again.

"Now let me hear what you have to say," said the great man, sitting back in the leather chair and placing finger-tips to tips and smiling blandly across them.

Charles told him his symptoms. The attacks seemed to be more frequent; in fact, nowadays any little disturbance would produce one. It was

not that they were more violent—he thought that they remained stationary in that way—but he was certain that they were more frequent.

Then came the usual performance of going over him. The same old questions, and, as far as Charles was concerned, the same old answers.

Then they sat down again facing one another. It was curious that Charles should have the impression that he was back in court and that he was a K.C. facing the judge, or perhaps not the K.C., perhaps only the prisoner at the bar, awaiting sentence.

“Well?” he said.

“This condition,” said the doctor calmly, “is very trying, very trying.”

“It is not dangerous?”

“Shock might prove dangerous.”

That was just what he had been afraid of. He had kept telling himself that angina does not kill, but he realised that shock could kill. Sufficient shock might produce a sufficient angina.

“I thought . . .,” he quavered.

“You certainly ought to live a very calm life. A very regular life. Avoid over-exercise, avoid any extra effort. Spare yourself whenever you can. Don’t overdo things. Leave off *before* you are tired.”

The voice droned on.

It was the curriculum mapped out for a very old man, a man older than sixty, for Charles knew some men of sixty who were quite young in spirit and could take exercise and enjoy themselves and did not have to think of rationing their amusements at all. He did not like the sound of it. It

would have been all very fine if he had married somebody his own age, but Doreen needed enjoyment; she wanted to go about. He did not like the idea of taking this verdict home to her.

"You mean I can do nothing?"

"Oh, nonsense; you can go for strolls, but you must take care of yourself. These attacks are liable to become more frequent, and also they may become more violent."

"But if I take care?"

"If you take care, I can assure you that you will live for many years. But you must avoid shock."

"Oh."

The doctor got up and patted his shoulder. He said: "Here, there, I have known patients with your trouble who have lived to a ripe old age. I should not let it prey upon your mind. At the same time you simply must be careful about shock. Now here is a diet sheet I want you to follow. And do go slow."

"Have I been doing too much, then?"

"You have been overdoing it, if that is what you mean."

"My wife is very young," he said slowly.

"I see."

"I don't like to imprison her."

"Well," said the doctor, "there are plenty of things that you can share. Quiet walks, theatres, things of that kind. You could travel a little, but you must avoid over-exertion and that kind of thing. That is quite wrong for you. The quieter, the more cowlike your life, the longer you are likely to live."

"Then," said Charles quietly, "angina does kill."

The doctor looked at him. He said: "You make it very difficult for me!"

"Not at all. There can be only one of two replies to that. It does or it does not. I should like to know how I really stand."

"Angina does kill, if provoked."

Heaven forbid that he would ever provoke it. He was the sort of person who had become accustomed to taking care of himself, and he was not likely to stop now. He got up, laying the notes on the table.

"I can't say that I feel better for this interview," he commented dryly.

"I'm sorry about that. I should have made you feel better. I have probably been the means of saving your life. Or, if I put it more correctly, of showing you how to save it. There is no reason why you should not live for years if only you can be persuaded to help yourself."

"Thank you."

He buttoned his coat and went out of the door. He did not know when he had felt more dejected. He went down the red-carpeted stairs, and it seemed that the ghosts of those little children which years ago had peered through the banisters looked after him with wide eyes.

I'm going to die, he thought.

The butler handed him his hat and gloves and opened the door with a flourish.

Outside, the car waited, and the chauffeur had dropped asleep over the wheel in the pleasant warmth of the sunshine. That was not what

Charles was looking at. A black cat had come out to play. It had climbed on to the bonnet of his car and lay there, curled up asleep.

It was a coal-black cat.

It was a black cat which would bring him luck, and he knew it.

green pastures when he left London, had always appealed to him.

On and on went the car, down Wrotham Hill, till it came to the quiet valley where Clifton stood.

He turned in at his own drive.

Doreen was not in. She had gone out with Mr. Flower. Hilda Neale told him, but there was some tea on the loggia. Would he like it now?

"Yes, please," he said.

In a sense he was sorry that Doreen was out, because he had wanted to tell her the story of the day. The girl in the green frock, the opal left in the car, the verdict which had made him so miserable, and then the lucky little black cat who had put fresh heart into him.

Yet he hesitated that perhaps it was wrong to tell her of the verdict; it would worry her possibly, and he did not like the idea.

Yet he was in one of those moods which wish to talk, and for this reason, when he settled down in the *chaise-longue* on the loggia with Hilda Neale opposite to him, it seemed to be the most natural thing in all the world to talk to her.

"Well?" said she, for she knew his moods and realised exactly how he felt.

"I saw the doctor."

"I hope that he gave a good verdict."

"He didn't. Not really! I don't want any of this to go further. My wife mustn't know."

She looked at him in a startled fashion, and her mouth began to twitch. He had always known that she cared for him, and he felt at this particular moment that he wanted to lean on her. She was older, more forceful, and, although she

had queer ways with her at times, she was a relation in one way.

"He said that I had got to take care."

"You are not careful enough, you know. He is right there," she told him.

"I must avoid shock. Any big shock might be fatal. That was what he inferred. I had an idea that it was going to be a bad verdict because on the way there there was an accident."

"You were in it?"

"No. A girl had been knocked off her bicycle before we got there. We took her to the hospital. She wore a green dress."

"Oh dear," said Hilda Neale, and again as though that were indeed a calamity, "oh dear!"

"We left her at the hospital and afterwards, not until we were nearly into London did I notice that she had dropped something. That was an opal ring."

Hilda Neale looked at him. Her eyes said everything, her lips nothing, and he knew that she gathered what he meant. "And then?" she said.

"Then I was quite sure that it would be difficult. I knew that when I went into the doctor's house. I felt that the morning had started un-luckily, and that it would go on that way."

"Of course."

She helped herself to a piece of cake, but her eyes never left his face. She was watching him all the time. She was taking in every word that he said.

"And the doctor was not helpful?" she suggested.

"They are always remote and austere, aren't they? He was like that. He was very remote. I felt all the time that he was keeping something back from me. He gave me that impression, and it was a most unpleasant impression to get."

"I expect he told you all that was necessary."

"I daresay, but at the same time he worried me. I had always thought that angina did not kill."

"And it does?"

"Yes, apparently it does."

She said nothing at all but went on eating, all the time watching him but saying nothing.

"I felt extremely worried," he said.

"I am not surprised."

"I came out of his house feeling that I did not care what happened, and then what do you think I saw? There was a black cat curled up asleep on the bonnet of the car."

She smiled then.

"It just shows that doctors are not infallible," she said.

"No, they're not! That's what I thought. I believe that I shall defeat him for all his gloomy prophecies. I believe that he was just an old fool."

"Of course he was."

He took confidence from her. There was something about the way that she said it that convinced him. He liked her manner. He was glad that he had confided in her, because very obviously she could give him the strength to go on.

"Sometimes," he said, "I think I am rather foolish to be so superstitious. After all there ought not to be anything in that kind of thing."

and yet when you get direct evidence like the opal, and the girl in green, what can you think?"

"I know. Undoubtedly there is something in it. I've noticed it so often myself."

"I didn't know you felt superstitious."

She sat there very quietly, hardly moving, and she said: "I was sure of it years ago, when I was a very small child. It was one Christmas. We had had our Christmas dinner at home, and we had gone out of the dining-room into the drawing-room. just the three of us, my father, my mother, and myself. I remember sitting there with the dessert that we had brought in from the other room, and suddenly, whilst we were talking, there was a terrible noise, just as though something had fallen with a crash in the other room."

She stopped for a moment. It seemed that the silence made the whole story more impressive.

"Well?" he said.

"We got up, and rushed back into the dining-room, my mother a little ahead. In the doorway she swayed, I remember so well seeing her. She had seen what it was. I stared under her arms at it, because I was so little, I was hardly tall enough to see. On the further wall there were two portraits, one of her, and one of my father, hanging. His picture had fallen down. I didn't know what it meant or anything about it, only that she was very frightened. We got her back into the drawing-room and she said: "Oh dear, it means death! I know it means death."

"But your father was a very old man when he died?"

"Yes, he was! A very old man. It was worse

than death, you see, it was dishonour. It was the following spring that he met Helen Strong, the girl he ran away with. It was the beginning of everything that was dreadful for us, for mother and I went away, and she got ill and eventually died. It was the end of our lives, just a picture falling down like that."

"And it made you believe in those things."

"Yes, wouldn't it have made you?"

He said: "I always have been superstitious. That was why the little cat made such an enormous impression on me. And remember there was that other cat, Nigger, that the gardener sent to Doreen the first Christmas that she was here. That brought us luck. We were engaged immediately afterwards."

Hilda Neale said nothing, but her face worked, and her lips moved as though there were words she wanted to utter but they simply would not come.

"I'm being stupid perhaps, but black cats have brought me luck before, and I have the feeling that they are doing a great deal for me now. I don't believe a word of what McArthur said. The attacks are not more severe and I think that I can parry their frequency by taking more care."

"You must take more care."

She said it kindly, and he knew then that she had always cared for him. In some things she was a thwarted old maid, in others she was kindness itself. He wished that he had understood her better, there was much about her that was tender and sweet, but much that was bitter and hard at the same time.

"You won't tell Doreen?" he asked.

"You must tell her what you think is wise."

"I would not like her to know that there was anything like this hanging over me. She worries about me. I don't want her to think that I'm an old crock."

"You're not an old crock."

"No, but if I have got to take care and not to take exertion nor to get worried, it does sound rather like the old crock, doesn't it?"

"I shall tell her nothing."

He had the feeling that she was highly satisfied to think that this was a secret that she and he were sharing together to the exclusion of his wife. He believed that she felt now that he trusted her, as in truth he did. It was her age: it would have been wrong to frighten Doreen with the story.

They had almost finished tea when Doreen came in; she had apparently been over to tea at the Flowers', and had got back early in case Charles had come home. She was anxious about him.

"Well, and what did the doctor say?"

"He said I was marvellous."

"No, Charles. Really? The truth, please?"

"Honestly he said that I was frightening myself all about nothing. And would you believe it, when I came out of his house, what do you think had happened? There was a little black cat curled up on the bonnet of my car. I knew then that I was in luck's way."

"Like Nigger?"

"Yes," he said, "like Nigger."

She went over to the table and took a piece of

cake. She sat down on the brick wall of the loggia, and started eating it.

"You're home early, Doreen?"

"Yes. I was worried about you."

"Anything else?"

She coloured slightly. "It wasn't very interesting there today. Only Peter."

"I thought you liked Peter."

The colour intensified. "So I do. But there is something about people who come from India. He is a bit Khatmandu in some ways."

"Khatmandu?"

She said "Yes", and laughed, but there was something uneasy about that laugh. He drew himself out of the *chaise-longue*, and, taking her arm, walked down to the lakeside with her, taking the last of the bread and butter for the ducks.

"Did something go wrong?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "it did. Peter was rather troublesome. There is a big dance being given over at Wethington, a charity affair, and he wanted to take me."

"Why on earth shouldn't he want to take you?"

"I didn't want to go."

"Why not?"

She stopped by the side of the lake, and un-linking her arm stood there pulling at the reeds and the rushes which grew there. "After all I *am* married. It doesn't seem fair to go gallivanting off like that."

"But, darling, I want you to enjoy yourself."

"I shouldn't enjoy myself without you, and you don't dance."

He thought of what Dr. McArthur had said only this morning, and put out a hand and took hers again.

"I'm an old fogey. But, dearest, I don't want to chain you to me like this. I'd rather you let Peter take you to that dance."

"But if I don't want to go . . . ?"

He put a finger under her chin and turned her face to him. She had turned rather pink, and he had the feeling that she was keeping something from him.

"You do want to go, my dearest," he said.

"Very well," she said, and then suddenly turned to him and clung to him imploringly. "Charles, I'm frightened. I'm so frightened."

"What are you afraid of?"

"It's silly, I know, but I'm frightened of myself and the future, and oh, everything in general. It makes me quite ashamed of myself to feel like this."

"You little goose. There's nothing to be afraid of."

For a moment she stood there uncertainly, then she said: "No, I suppose there isn't," reluctantly, as though she was still undecided in her own mind. Then she watched him feed the ducks, and walked back to the house with him, and a west wind blew in their faces.

He remembered as a child being told that the west wind was the wind of adventure.

CHAPTER XVI

I slept, and dreamed that life was Beauty;
I woke, and found that life was Duty.

ELLEN STURGIS HOOPER.

THE subject of the dance came up again the following afternoon, when Peter had come over to enquire if Doreen would be riding with him.

He mentioned it to Charles.

"I shall be leaving England the week after the dance," he said, "and I rather wanted to go to it, but for some reason or other Doreen isn't interested."

"She gets moments of scruple about leaving me, and it is so foolish because I'm quite happy. I want her to enjoy herself. After all"—and he smiled gravely—"when a man my age marries a girl of her age, he knows that she will want some recreation."

"You're very broad-minded about her."

"Well, I want her to be happy. I don't want to tie her to my apron strings and be dog-in-the-manger about it."

"Nobody could call you that."

Charles said: "You can take it from me that she'll come to the dance. I think that she ought to." And then, very kindly indeed: "I shall be sorry when you go back; after all, it has been very pleasant for Doreen to have somebody her own age to go about with."

Peter said nothing.

When he had gone back Charles spoke to Doreen, and she was evasive. She'd certainly go to the dance if he wished, but she would rather he came, too. To make it easier for her he said that perhaps he would, but only the following day something happened to stop that.

Charles was feeling very much better. It might be the medicine that Dr. McArthur had prescribed, but he chose to think it was the fact that he had argued with himself and had now convinced himself that the diagnosis had been entirely wrong, and that there was nothing whatever the matter with him. The angina would go on for years; it was not getting worse, and, anyway, the little black cat, harbinger of good fortune, would see to that.

He went across the lake with the idea of seeing the estate the other side. It was not often that he went there, for this part was devoted to shrubberies, very charming in spring, when the lilacs and laburnums were in flower, and the prunus, but then they passed through a phase when there were no flowers, and nobody walked there until the old mulberry tree bore fruit.

Today he decided that he would go across and see if he could not lay out a new garden there. He had had an idea of starting a knot garden; it had occurred to him only last night, when he was reading an old book on Hampton Court, which had made constant references to the knot garden there.

"I'd like to get one here," he told Doreen.

"I've always fancied them," she said, "and it would remind me of the convent."

"That was a herb garden."

"I know. But the two are alike in some dim way; I don't know why."

He decided in his own mind that he would go to the other side of the lake and see if it were possible to lay out a garden there, say nothing to Doreen, and then one day take her for a walk through the shrubbery and come across it as a surprise.

It was a fine morning and he walked quite briskly. He felt well. The shrubberies were overgrown; the gardeners, knowing that he so seldom came this way, obviously had taken advantage of it and had trusted that they would not be discovered.

He walked round, found a suitable site, and decided that he would return via the head of the lake. It was a morning asking for a walk. The swans had made their big byre of a nest again by the island at the far end. He walked across the sluice gates, with the water rippling through and falling in a cascade from the upper to the lower lake. He turned round to the left, with the broom in full flower and the bees humming above it, and the scent of honey and verdure and flowers all blending together.

I feel young, he thought, I feel happy; life is going to be so different.

He walked too fast. He did not look where he was stepping, and he slipped. It all happened in a moment. He stepped off the grass edge to the path, and must have touched a smooth pebble. He turned quickly, his ankle doubled beneath him and almost instantly he was down

on the grass. He fell lightly; it would have been easy enough to have fallen and to have hurt himself badly, instead of which he merely slithered among the broom and the sorrel and the grass, but when he tried to rise again his heart was making a strange noise, and there was the acute pricking pain in his arm, and a worse pain in the ankle which had doubled beneath him.

He knew that he had an attack coming on and had just time to get the tablets into his mouth, then he must have fainted. He thought, as the world went dim, nobody will ever find me here; but he was wrong.

Peter and Doreen had been going for a walk, and by accident they came this way. Just recently things had been strained between them. It was as though a wall of reserve had suddenly reared itself, something that they could not climb over and could not circumvent.

Doreen knew that they were fast approaching a climax. She could not bear the thought that Peter would be going away, and yet she knew only too well that he must not stay.

Without knowing it she was being driven into a blind alley from which there seemed to be no escape. She wanted to stay loyal to Charles, whom she loved, and who, she knew, would have died for her. Peter must go. He must go even if it broke her heart.

"You'll miss me?" he asked, as they came up the path with the broom on either side, and the bees working in the flowers and the smell of honey and flower scent.

"Naturally I shall miss you."

"You're reserved, aren't you?"

"I don't mean to be."

He said: "You're a funny girl. We have known one another fairly well and yet I've never actually seen your heart. You keep that screened, don't you? Nobody really knows what is going on inside you."

"Don't they?"

But she could not go on playing this evasive game for ever. There might be the chance of keeping it up if she did not see too much of him until he went. But he must go soon. If once he knew what she was thinking, if once he got to realise how deeply she cared for him, then it would be hopeless.

They came round the corner and saw Charles lying there. She thought he had had an attack, and rushed forward, but Peter was ahead of her.

"Look, he twisted his ankle: he must have fainted from the pain! The thing has swollen up enormously already."

"But he has angina. That must have been what did it." She knelt down beside him feeling for his heart, and finding the little bottle of tablets in his hand. So it *had* been an attack! He was worse, then.

Peter said: "Look here, you go to the house for help, and tell that Neale woman to phone for the doctor. We've got to get him back into the place."

"I want to stay with him."

"You can't. I'll see after him. Go and get someone to come to help with him, the chauffeur

and the car. He could drive it over the grass."

She ran all the way. She ran rather like a colt runs, in long loping strides, and she covered the ground with surprising speed. But she was short of breath as she told the chauffeur to go round, and when she flung herself panting into the hall chair, with Miss Neale standing there beside her, staring at her as though she had done something surprisingly young and silly.

"Please phone the doctor," she panted.

"Mr. Fayre isn't ill?"

"Please phone quickly."

She hadn't the breath to say much, but she had the common sense to notice Hilda Neale at this particular moment, her face blanched and her lips quite bloodless. Always Doreen had thought that she had imagined that Hilda cared for Charles, but now she knew that it was not imagination; it was something quite different. Hilda Neale had always cared for him, but her mind was so warped, and she bore such malignant hatred for the girl who had (she thought) usurped her place, that it was now a strange kind of love closely allied to hate.

As Doreen recovered her breath she heard Miss Neale at the telephone, and almost before she had finished there was the scrunch of the car tyres on the gravel drive outside and the car drew up at the door.

Peter and the chauffeur helped Charles upstairs. He was conscious now, but he looked desperately ill.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, my dear. Must have fainted. Afraid I've sprained my ankle."

"But how ever did you do it?"

"I turned off the grass edge, I think, and slipped. That's all I remember."

They helped him upstairs.

Doreen felt quite dazed. All the time she had the impression that Hilda Neale was watching her like a malignant ghost and that she felt quite sick. The little doctor came bustling in, jovial and merry, if a trifle foolish, and he went upstairs to Charles and came down again.

"Very unfortunate," he said, "most unfortunate: a sprain like that will keep a man tied to bed longer than most things, and with this lovely weather, too."

Doreen could not see that weather had anything to do with it. She said: "Is it dangerous?"

"Dangerous, my dear lady? No, of course not. Not dangerous at all. But he will be properly tied by the foot for a time, I'm afraid. Shall I order a nurse for him?"

"Must he have one?"

"He'll need waiting upon."

"I'd like to wait on him myself."

"It'll be arduous," the doctor warned her.

She said: "I don't care. I married him and it is my duty to see after him. I'll stay with him."

The little doctor shrugged his shoulders. After he had gone she saw that Peter Flower was still there; he had stayed to see if there was anything more that he could do. She had been up to see Charles and to satisfy herself that he was moderately comfortable. Hilda Neale had bandaged the ankle; she had taken a first-aid diploma years ago and knew how to deal with the work.

"The pain is better now, anyway," he said, and smiled courageously, "and the rest will do me good."

"I wonder if enforced rest has ever done anybody any good?" she said.

"Now you run off and amuse yourself. I'm not going to chain you to an old man's sick-room," he said.

"All the same, I'm going to see after you," she warned him.

She went down to lunch and found Peter still there. He had hardly liked to leave. He was sitting on the loggia with a cigarette, a drink and a pile of papers. She went over to him.

"You'll have some lunch?"

"I'd like to."

She said: "I'm afraid this means that the dance is dead off. I couldn't possibly go away and leave him alone like this."

They went into the dining-room. It was an enormous room, very plain, with oil paintings of other mistresses of this great house, and over the carved mantelshelf a portrait of a Stuart master. It was one of Charles' rules that they waited on themselves. There was nothing that he disliked more than servants in the room during meals, putting a limit to the conversation. The bell lay by Doreen's hand, but lunch was for the two of them.

Peter sat down. Then he said: "I shall be bitterly disappointed if you don't let me take you to that dance."

"But you can see how impossible it is."

"I'm sure that Charles would not want to keep

you here: he likes you to enjoy yourself."

"I should not feel happy if I deserted him."

There was silence for a moment whilst they ate lobster mayonnaise; then Peter spoke again.

"You take your marriage very seriously?"

"Isn't marriage meant to be taken seriously?"

"Of course; but when you marry a man of his age you have got to be reasonable."

"How do you mean 'of his age'?"

"You know quite well what I mean."

Deliberately she rang for the butler to come in to take away the plates. Some minutes intervened, the lobster going out and the chicken patties coming in. Then the door shut again, soundlessly, but relieving the tension which had been very noticeable to both of them.

Peter said: "Look here, Doreen, this can't go on."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"Oh, my dear, don't be so deliberately foolish! You know I'm in love with you, you must know that you are in love with me. It was bound to come out some time or other. I've done my damndest to bottle it up, but I couldn't. I had to tell you. It may be disloyal, it may be wrong, but I'd got to tell you. What are we going to do about it?"

She did not deny anything.

"I don't know," she said.

"Doreen, how in the name of fortune do you expect me to go away the week after next?"

"You've got to, it's your job."

"Yes, I know, but it is going to be the most dreadful thing that has ever happened."

She made a last effort. "I don't see why."

"Are you being deliberately silly?"

"I'm married to Charles. I married him knowing that he was older than I am, and realising that it might be difficult; but it is something that I did with my eyes open. I'm staying with him for always."

"You don't love him?" said Peter.

There had been a time in her life when she would have protested that she did, but she could not do that now. Then she had never been able to compare her feelings for Charles with those deeper feelings for another man. Now she was in love. She knew that everything that she had ever experienced for her husband had been brought about by gratefulness and by the longing to love. She had mistaken caring for a man for loving. The two were not the same emotions at all.

"Well?" said Peter. "You don't deny it, I see. Perhaps you realise how useless it would be."

She felt herself going suddenly little girl. She laid down her knife and fork and folded her hands above her plate.

"What do we do about this, Peter?"

"He said: 'I think we can't be expected to do anything but the ordinary thing.'"

"What is the ordinary thing?"

He said: "You come to India with me."

She shut her eyes, dreaming of the profound happiness that would give her. If only she could go away, right away, and start for that lovely country of which Peter had told her so much. He had said that there was nowhere in the whole

world so exquisite for a honeymoon as Kashmir. She wanted to go there.

She could glimpse the Taj Mahal and all those strange qualities of beauty which belong to the Eastern world. She brought herself back to the present moment with a jerk.

"It isn't possible."

"Other people have found it possible."

"But, Peter, don't you see? Don't you understand how I couldn't possibly leave Charles. He has done so much for me, not only now, but when I was a baby. It was his old nurse who brought me up. I owe him a debt I could never repay if I stayed with him for a hundred years. Besides which, in my own particular way, I do care for him. I care most deeply. He is a dear to me."

She was almost in tears.

But Peter was not impressed. "You talk about him as though he were your father," he said, "and I honestly believe that is all you feel for him. Doreen, my dear, don't you realise that is not the way that you should love him?"

"I was perfectly happy until you came."

"You were perfectly happy until you realised that everything you felt for Charles was unreal and that it could not possibly be the right thing. That's the truth, you know."

"I don't think I want to face the truth."

He finished his patty and laid down his knife and fork. I'm sorry this happened. All this long time I have been hoping that I'd have the decency to get out without saying anything, but I love you too much. I love you so much that I

can't get out without saying anything. I want to take you with me. I want you for ever."

"Please . . .," she begged.

She rang again.

A decade of time seemed to have passed since the man came in for the lobster plates and replaced them with the chicken patties.

He set a lemon sponge before her and went away again. The door closed once more, and they were alone. She did not know whether she wanted to be alone with him or not; she felt bewildered and scared.

He said: "Seriously, Doreen, we've got to arrive at some conclusion. We've got to be sensible. There is so little time left."

"How can we be sensible about anything so extraordinary."

"It isn't extraordinary really. It has happened a great many times before in life." He was resting his elbows on the table, and his chin on his hands, and watching her with steady dark eyes which she knew would take no nay. "A girl married a man too old for her. It isn't his fault, he cannot help his age; it isn't her fault, she is too young to foresee what will happen. Then there comes along the real thing, somebody her own age, somebody she can love properly, and she falls desperately in love with him."

"But what is the answer?"

"I don't know. That is for us to decide."

She lit a cigarette quietly, inhaling the smoke; then she said: "I tell you, Peter, the answer is that I abide by my word and stay here with Charles."

"He would let you go if he knew. It strikes me as being uncommonly nice, noble and sensible. I am quite sure that if he knew this was happening he would help you out with it."

"It is because I know that, too, that is thing in this world would make me tell him."

"If I told him . . . ?"

"You won't, Peter. Promise me you won't? You must give me your word on that."

"I don't see why I should. You're not being very fair on me, Doreen. After all, I have some angle on this. I do love you, you know."

If he were sentimental she supposed that she would capitulate. She wished with all her heart that she were not so drawn towards him.

"Peter, please don't make it more difficult. It is a terrible situation. Please don't make it worse."

The door opened again. Miss Neale was standing there. Doreen could not remember her coming in like this ever before, and for a moment she had the innate feeling that something was amiss. Hilda Neale, when there were guests, never came into the dining-room; it seemed very strange that she should be here now.

She said: "Shall I have coffee sent on to the loggia for you?"

There had been no need for her to come here at all. Doreen knew that she had arrived because she was suspicious, and it was galling that she had every right to those suspicions.

"Thank you," she said.

They went on to the loggia. She poured out the coffee and sat down on the big chair. She did

not want to talk any more. Their future was something that she dared not discuss, particularly here, in case that furtive, flitting figure of Hilda Neale should come into the room beyond.

"Not now, Peter, please not now."

"But don't you see, there may not be any other time? Now is tremendously important."

"I can't discuss it now," she insisted. "There shall be some other time. I will make some other time for it."

"When?"

"I don't know when."

"If you won't talk about it now, then I shall talk about it now."

She said quickly: "After dinner the day after tomorrow. I'll come to the park gates. Nobody will be there, and we can talk peacefully. There is that funny little summer-house. We could meet there."

"What time?"

"Nine," she suggested, and went on stirring her coffee. Anything to postpone the hour. For the moment she knew that she could not discuss anything, she was too confused by her own thoughts.

CHAPTER XVII

Much makes life itself a lie,
Flattering dust with eternity.

BYRON.

CHARLES was surprisingly better. The sprain had not been as bad as the doctor had thought at first, and he would not be chained to his room for too long. Yet Doreen had spent hardly a moment from his side when two evenings later she went out to meet Peter at the drive gates.

She had made up her mind that they must part now. She must never see him again. She had built up a barrier of good resolutions, and yet, when she saw him already waiting for her in the little summer-house that an ancestress of years ago had built, all those good resolutions failed her.

The dusk was drifting across the park in blue and amethyst, and the pine-trees were smears of darkness against the sky. She went to the doorway of the summer-house, which smelt of fir cones and of dust and indescribable sweetness.

"My dear," said Peter very tenderly.

She had not thought that he would take her into his arms and draw her against his heart. Coming here it had been so easy to plan the easy way in which she would dismiss him. Coming here she had thought of big speeches, but now, with his heart beating by her own, with his arms round her and his lips near, all that drifted away and was forgotten.

"You mustn't," she said, like a village girl who would escape her lover.

"Why not? You love me and I love you. Why must not I kiss you?"

"Oh, Peter, what can we do?"

It was the pathetic cry of something young and helpless which suddenly finds itself adrift in a world too big for it.

"We've got to tell Charles. We have got to tell him that this can't go on. He must divorce you, and you must come to India with me."

For a moment she thought of India, of tulip-trees and acacias, and then she dismissed the idea. "It would kill him. You don't realise how dreadful it would be for him. I could not possibly do it."

"We cannot both of us spoil our lives for the one man," he suggested.

"It isn't spoiling our lives! Doing right, abiding by a promise, and sticking to your guns is not spoiling your life."

"Would you be happy without me?"

"No," she declared. And then bravely: "But I'd be happy in doing the right thing."

"You silly child! Doing the right thing by Charles is not doing the right thing by me. It depends on which man you love better."

"It does nothing of the sort. It depends on which man is my husband."

They sat and talked.

The moon rose soft and wise, and the world became changed into one threaded with silver. The park had become a fairyland, and they themselves were no longer two people who walk a dim old world, but immortals who tread a romantic

path. They sat there hand in hand, and she could feel the warmth of his body near her own. It was ironical that this dream could not last, a shame that she would be forced to tear down the illusion. Tonight when she left him it would be for ever.

"This is not the end," he said when finally he rose, and she stood there still holding his hands, and with her heart making funny little trembling sounds in her breast.

"Peter, I could not bear the pain of parting again."

"Is it such pain?"

"Terrible pain. I want you to go away quickly. Go right away so that I do not see, and please don't think too badly of me. Please, my dear, realise that I am doing the thing that should make you proud, even though I am denying both of us the greatest happiness."

He said, "Kiss me again" commandingly, and she kissed him, then turned and hid her eyes, so that he went and she never saw him go.

She walked across the misty park with the moonlight which is so deceptive, and the stars through the cedars, and the house looking like a ghost house with yellow eyes of lit windows, and the roof etched against the sky.

She did not know how she was going to bear it.

Another thing that she did not know was when Hilda Neale went to her window and looked out. Earlier in the evening she had seen Doreen go. She had thought then that she was going to meet Peter, and had followed at a distance. She had seen them from a long way off, and she did not need to go closer to verify the man.

She had come home secretly indignant. It was wrong that a girl should lead a young man on when all the time she was married to somebody like Charles. Hilda Neale would have loved Charles devotedly and would have remained faithful to him. It hurt her that he could have put another girl in her place, the place she had always thought that she would be able to fill.

It was so grossly unfair.

She thought over it all the next day. There were little things that Doreen did which she knew signified that last night she and Peter had parted. Besides, today for the first time for a long while he had not called, nor had he rung up.

It did not need any very clever deductions to put two and two together.

Charles was better. He had chafed against the room upstairs, and at the end of the first week there had managed to persuade the doctor to let him hobble down on a couple of sticks. The weather was suddenly very hot, and it was beautiful on the loggia.

Doreen was very attentive.

One evening when he was there he called her to his side. "My dear kid, you've been with me far too much. Lately you have had no fun whatsoever."

"I've been happy with you."

He said, "You're looking quite peaky," and he touched her face with an appraising finger. "We can't have this, you know. You're going to that dance with Peter?"

"No, I got out of it."

"For my sake, I'll be bound."

"No, it wasn't," yet it was, and she knew it, and could not explain it to him.

"Why did you do it? You knew particularly that I wanted you to go and you did promise me that you would."

"I'm not so fond of dancing really, and I'd hate to go out to a thing like that when you were ill at home."

"That's nonsense, when you have been nursing me so hard you want some recreation and it is important that you should go to the dance. I shall ring him up in the morning and tell him that I'm relying on him to take you."

"No, please don't." She hoped that her tone did not sound too eager. She hesitated for a moment, afraid to say too much lest he should guess that something was amiss. His next question verified that suspicion in her.

"You haven't quarrelled?"

"Of course not."

"Then why are you so insistent that you don't want to go?"

"I tell you I wouldn't be happy. I want to stay with you. When you love a person very much you hate leaving them when they are ill," she added rather hesitatingly.

"All the same I think that you ought to go."

Last thing that night she went in to see him and stood by his bed holding his hand. "Please, Charles, don't ring up Peter about it, I don't want to go to the dance."

"I don't think you know what is good for you," he replied.

He had rung Peter up.

She knew that when she went into his room next day. They had had a long conversation and Peter had said something about thinking that Doreen wanted to get out of it. He was game, he told Charles. Charles had arranged that he should dine here first and come over before dinner, and then they could go on to the dance. Hilda Neale had heard him telephoning when she had come into the room with fresh bandages for him.

Now she had no doubt about the future events whatsoever.

"I did ask you not to," said Doreen in a little rather piteous voice, when she knew of it.

"Darling, I'm so much older than you are; won't you sometimes let me judge for you?" he asked. "I only want your happiness."

"I know."

But she felt utterly wretched about it. That evening she got a note from Peter, sent over by one of the maids from Mrs. Flowers', and she knew that Hilda Neale knew whom it was from, by the way that she came into the room with it and the look in her eyes.

"I brought it up myself, in case it was important."

"It won't be important," was the reply. She spoke slowly, because she wanted to impress Miss Neale.

When she had gone, Doreen opened the letter. It was brief.

MY DEAR,

You see the gods are with us. I don't know how you felt, but I knew that wasn't fare-

well, and do not think that I could have borne it had it really been anything of the sort. Charles 'phoned me and I am dining with you next Thursday and taking you to the ball after. My dear, surely we may be allowed to steal this one night of happiness from life? Surely this is not asking too much?

As always,

PETER.

Then she knew that she was devoutly thankful that they would meet again, that she could not have borne that other to be farewell either, and after all had wanted desperately to go to the dance.

One half of her seemed to hate the idea, the other half gloried in it. Why not let life take the helm and guide the ship? She was sick of confusion and conjecturing.

She wrote back, "I think I'm glad too," and posted it before she had time to change her mind.

Now she had burnt her boats behind her!

CHAPTER XVIII

For walk where we will, we tread upon some story.
CICERO.

HILDA NEALE knew what was happening, because she had always made knowledge her particular business. She knew quite well now that Doreen was in love with Peter, and given the opportunity that love would prove big enough for them to go away together. She knew also that Charles was blind to what was going on.

He believed in his wife, and it needed something greater than Hilda Neale to shake that influence.

For a whole week she thought about it, knowing that time was pressing, knowing that now there were merely a few days before Peter sailed again for India.

When Hilda had first come here to Clifton and had seen Charles for the first time, she had known that he was the one man that she could care for. Her life had been shorn of happiness, so that she put a high price upon joy. She had hoped that he would in time grow to love her. Men care for those who pander to their creature comforts, and she saw that his home was well run, that his food was good, and of the kind that he liked.

There had been a time when she had flattered herself that he was slowly growing fond of her. She understood him. She knew him far better than the silly child he had brought back from that convent. But the silly child had the attractions

which Hilda knew that she herself lacked. The child had beauty and youth, the shuttles which dart in and out of the loom of love and carry a golden thread with them. Hilda had passed these things.

Still she had hoped that the child would not fancy Charles, though he might fancy the child, and that when he was rejected, and had to take her up the aisle to wed some young man of her own choosing, he would return to Hilda.

She was wrong.

Doreen had been so grateful for everything that Charles had done for her that she did not turn from him, rather she turned to him.

When they became engaged, Hilda Neale had seen defeat staring at her hollow-eyed. She had believed that she could not go on, then she had become ill, and during the long, tardy convalescence of that illness had formed a different plan. It was inconceivable that the child would stay tied to an old man, and Charles was growing older. If he himself did not realise that the angina was taking greater toll of him, she was not so blind. Now he needed a gentle twilight, a calm and repose which would prolong his life. She did not require a doctor's reassurance to tell her that shock was bad for him.

She had waited for the time when a young man would appear, and now here he was.

"I have bided my time," she thought.

She knew that Doreen was going to the dance, and that Charles himself had arranged it, because she had heard him on the telephone. She knew that a new frock had come down from town, some-

thing charming and unsophisticated, radiant with youth, soft white lace, with a bertha of lilies-of-the-valley round the shoulders. Virginal. Young. Hilda Neale hated the sight of it. And, she told herself, this would go on, unless Charles opened his eyes wider.

If she were the one to tell him, he would only say, and possibly with every cause, that it was jealousy. If she drew his attention to it, she would weaken her own cause.

On the morning of the dance she was busy in the library. At this time of year the wood was all repaired. The carving had become soiled, and the polishers came down from London and worked here. It was something in the shape of a spring clean.

Today the polishers had gone, and the maids were putting the place to rights again. Hilda Neale came into the room and looked at it. On one side three portraits were standing, stacked back against the wall; she went to them and looked at them. Charles' mother, a fine-looking woman with a long proud nose, and little fair curls arranged in a fringe along her brow. A portrait of his great-grandfather, wearing a naval uniform; the picture of himself in silk. She looked closely at it, and saw how much he had changed during these last few years; it was his illness, for although he made light of the pain, she knew that it was intense. He might argue that it was not growing worse, but she understood by the little tight line between his brows, the dull, unhappy look which came to his eyes in an attack and the way that his hands fluttered, that it was growing worse

In the picture there was no little tight line, and the eyes were bright and keen.

She touched it lovingly. She saw then that the cord by which it was suspended was almost worn through, and made an exclamation. If it had hung much longer like that it would have fallen, and then what would he have thought?

Death? Or unhappiness? She remembered the story in her own life, when her father's picture had been found that Christmas evening, fallen to the ground beside the sideboard. She remembered how impressed he had been by that story.

Her hands lingered about the frayed cord.

"We're ready for that picture now, Miss Neale," said one of the maids, perched on a step-ladder, with a duster in her hand, and a great deal of unprovocative cashmere stocking showing.

"Are you?" She stood quite still, uncertain of how to act. If the picture fell, would he understand?

"I'll give you a hand," said the other maid, and came across to fetch it. They carried it with them to the fireplace.

"Why, look," said the maid on the ladder, "that cord is quite frayed. The picture might fall down and then what would he say? Oh my, he would be surprised!"

The girls started to giggle. They knew quite well how superstitious he was, and it was more than a joke in the servants' hall. Hilda Neale silenced them with a look.

"It'll last," she said.

The girls looked at one another. They knew quite well that it would not last, but they also

knew better than to contradict Miss Neale. She was very unpopular in the servants' hall, because her word was law, and she took no nay.

"Oh, well," said one, as she hoisted it into place, "what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over," all *apropos* of nothing at all!

The picture was solemnly hung.

It shone there against the clean wall. The bright eyes of the much younger man stared penetratingly at Hilda Neale, almost accusingly.

She knew that her own lips were compressed, and that her heart had made a funny little trembling feeling, as though it could bear no more. She knew that she had taken a step into the future, and was not sure which way that step would lead her. She knew also that the two maids were looking at her, and that they also knew what she had done.

"Now get finished quickly," she said; "it is a chilly evening, and the master will want to sit here tonight."

Then she went out of the room.

CHAPTER XIX

Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
And life be a proof of this.

ROBERT BROWNING.

It was amusing at the dance.

Doreen had come here with Peter. She had been very quiet during dinner, sitting at the head of the table, exquisitely laid. Miss Neale knew how to do that sort of thing perfectly. She sat there with the lilies-of-the-valley about her shoulders, and the full white lace frock spread about her. From his end of the table Charles was admiring.

She did not know what the evening would bring. She only hoped that she would be fair to her husband. This was her last night with Peter, the last time they would meet, perhaps, and she was afraid for it. The whole meeting had been none of her seeking, it made her afraid. But now that it had happened, she had got to go through with it.

Charles did all the talking during dinner, for he was in a bright mood. He was feeling so much better. The ankle had recovered itself wonderfully, in spite of the doctor's gloomy forebodings. He was proud of himself! He could hobble now quite comfortably.

"I shall stay up for you," he told them.

"There won't be any need, we may be very late," said Peter, and he glanced at Doreen.

"I'm tired," she said. "I don't want to be too late."

"Very well. We'll leave before it is over," said Peter.

"No"—Charles was quite firm—"it is a pleasant evening, a little chilly, but quite nice. I have a book that I want to read, so don't hurry on my account, please don't hurry for me. I want Doreen to enjoy herself, she has had far too much of this house lately."

She ought to have been grateful to him for his thoughtfulness; instead, she felt inwardly angry. She went to get her cloak. She was deliberately a long time, and came back into the library where they were talking together. A long green velvet cloak of lily-of-the-valley leaves covered her. It fell to her feet; against it her hair glowed like corn in an August sun.

"I'm ready," she said.

She went across to Charles and kissed him goodbye.

"Enjoy yourself, my dearest."

"I know that I shall."

"And don't hurry back because of me."

"No," she said, then turned quickly and went out into the hall.

She got into the little two-seater beside Peter. It was a radiantly lovely night, growing dark, and the cedars were in a cirrus of cloud against the sky. She spoke only in monosyllables, and Peter said very little. At this moment she thought perhaps she could avoid any actual challenge.

The drive was ten miles, with a country growing dimmer with every mile. And all the time they

talked of trivialities, the things that were quite matterless, although both were acutely conscious of the fact that this moment in their lives mattered so much.

She had thought that she would enjoy every moment. It was like a dream. She danced with Peter. Tunes seemed to kaleidoscope through her brain. She found herself humming them. The whole evening was spent in skimming over surfaces, talking of things that were unimportant, pleasant chat, a superb indifference to the parting which came so near.

She knew quite well that long into the future she would be saying to herself, "If only I had to-night over again," and tonight would never be re-born for either of them. She knew that everything they were feeling now would come back to her with an acuteness that was pain, and she would long to feel his arms about her again, and his eyes and lips so close, and to be dancing with him.

He said at last: "It's getting late. Oughtn't we to go back?"

"It's only midnight. Surely you don't want to cut the evening short?"

He looked at her.

"I'm afraid I can't prolong it like this. If I try to something will happen. I can't do it."

She did not argue. She nodded, because she understood exactly what he meant, and she went to fetch her cloak. Perhaps it was wise to end the dancing here and now, perhaps it would have been a good deal wiser if it had never been. But she had not been mistress of her own future; Charles had arranged this for her. She knew quite well

that he had thought that he was being kind; he little knew how much tonight had hurt her.

They said goodbye and went out to the car. Out here in the moonlight they could hear the band, only the sweeter for distance. She got in and covered herself with a rug, drawing up the hood of her cloak over her hair.

"You didn't think me a frightful swine dragging you away?" he asked.

"No, no, of course not. I understood."

"Can't we drive into the country, and stop and talk? I can't go on like this. I can't leave off here and now. We've got to thrash this thing out, Doreen. Oh, I know I ought to drive you straight back and say goodbye, but how can I? We have been like two polite strangers this evening, and it would be quite all right if we were polite strangers; but we aren't. We are two people desperately in love."

She said nothing, because it seemed to her that there was nothing that she could possibly say in reply. She let him drive on until they left the little town behind them, and climbed the hill beyond, where in daylight there was a view of the valley and the wooded hills opposite, and the smell of the sea from far, far away. He ran the car on to the grass verge, with a big oak sheltering them, and the stars pricking out of the darkness, and the moon running a silver furrow across the ploughed field alongside.

"We've got to talk," he said.

"I don't see that it can do any good. You are going back to India next week. I'm staying with Charles."

"But you care for me?"

She had started to say "Not really," but she stopped dead, because suddenly she could not help but speak the truth. "Yes, I care for you," she said very slowly indeed, and the words meant so much to her. "I do care for you enormously."

"You can't spend the rest of your life at Clifton."

"Why not? Charles has angina. If I were to tell him about this he might have an attack and die. You would not make me responsible for his death?"

"You have said so often that angina does not kill," he reminded her.

"Charles has been a good deal feebler lately."

He caught hold of her hand and gave it a small impatient shake.

"Don't you see that you cannot live in dead men's shoes. Charles is only sixty, the ordinary expectation of life is three-score years and ten. That is the allotted span, and there is no reason in this world why he should expect it less than any other man of us. Ten years is a very long time."

"You talk as though I grudged it to him."

She knew that his arm was going round her, and felt suddenly afraid. "Don't you grudge ten years of your own wasted youth, something you can never get back again? If we do the right thing we lose the greatest happiness that life has to offer us. If we run away we have that happiness."

"At his expense. Peter dear, it would be so different if he had been a hard man, but he has always been so good to me."

"I know. But oh, my sweet, I'd be good to you, too."

She ought not to have let him kiss her. She might have guessed that once he did she would not be able to control herself any more. A long sweet kiss, as though there were no world beyond this moment, and no Charles waiting up for them at home. She raised her arms and locked them about Peter's neck. Now she did not care.

He said: "You can't say that you'll let me go all that way alone."

"And I can't come with you."

"Why not? All that you can offer Charles is a husk. He won't want that husk and you ought to know it. In fairness tell him the truth."

"I don't know what to do."

"He realised this moment might happen. You told me that he did when you got engaged. He was prepared for it."

"That was because he is always so kind and considerate; he thinks ahead."

"And thinking ahead, he knew this."

She turned to him desperately. "What am I to do?" she asked.

"The fair thing to do is to go back together and tell him the truth."

He put his arms about her and drew her head down again. There was the scent of lily-of-the-valley, there was the sweetness of a moment when nothing outside their two selves seemed to matter.

Then she knew that he had won.

"Peter, I love you too much."

"Never too much, my dear, never too much. We have got to face this thing together; it may be

dreadful for a little while, but we have got to face it. It is the brave thing to do."

"It's funny, but I have the feeling that Hilda Neale will crow over me."

"I shouldn't worry about her. She has a warped brain, anyway. The only thing to worry about is ourselves, and the future." Again he kissed her.

It seemed that they sat here with the wonder of Kashmir coming very close. She would see the Taj Mahal. She would see Bombay.

"There is no going back," she said.

"No, darling, no going back."

They drove out of the shadow of the oak-tree into the silver of the radiant night. As they drove off an owl who had been roosting there spread his wings in alarm and flew from them hooting.

"That would have terrified Charles," she said. "He is so superstitious about things of that sort. He would have hated it."

"I'm not superstitious."

"Neither am I."

They drove away hand in hand. There was strength and warmth and life to be gained from feeling the pressure of his fingers.

They drew the car to a standstill before the house. It was shrouded in darkness, only the yellow gleam from the library shone out across the lawn down to the lake, where it was reflected in a drowned pool of gold.

The french windows were open.

"We'll go in that way," she said.

Peter went on ahead. Her long cloak seemed to hold her back as she rounded the corner through the little gate and came down the gravel path.

She saw Peter step through the french windows, then turn quickly to her.

"Wait a moment, Doreen"—like a command, as though he expected to be obeyed, and she, surprised at the new tone in his voice, came to a halt.

She stood there uncertainly. It was funny that she should think of the owl!

* * * * *

Charles had sat back to enjoy his book.

It was on a subject that interested him very much, yet a couple of hours later he found that he was becoming bored by it, and closed it, and sat back. Hilda Neale had herself brought him in the decanter of whisky, and he poured out a stiff one.

They would be much later, he knew.

Sitting here he could revise his life. He could look back to the day when he had held what he thought was a lovely boy dressed as a dragon fly in his arms. And later to the time when he had married Doreen. He had been afraid that the marriage might not stay fast, that a younger man might come between them. No younger man had come.

Or had he?

He was thinking of the two of them as they had been at dinner. So unnaturally quiet. He had had misgivings about their behaviour and wondered if he had been the thing that he had himself so often despised in court, the blind husband. If he had, Peter was leaving for India only next week. The episode was at an end.

Maybe he and Doreen would have other children, and if they had another child it would

make all the difference to their lives. It would anchor her.

He thought of the opal lying flashing on the floor of the car and the girl in the green dress. He thought of the little black cat curled so comfortably on the bonnet of his car that day when McArthur had been so particularly depressing.

There was something in omens.

In upon the frail fabric of his dreams there came a sound. It was disturbingly real. It was the sound of rope which gave, the crashing, creaking sound of the final threads wearing through. He turned his head and stared up at the picture, coming toppling towards him. He saw the bright young eyes and the handsome bearing of the man who had just taken silk coming slithering down to the ground.

A falling picture meant death.

He rose nervously; he felt for his heart, aware that it pricked maddeningly. Something rose in his throat and choked him. The omen had been prophetic. It had been the final shock that he could not bear—it was death.

He toppled forward atop the picture.